

Holy Trinity Sunday

THE VISION OF THE HOLY ONE

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

1In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

4The pivots* on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

6Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7The seraph* touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' 8Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

DIAGNOSIS: At a Loss in the Presence of the Holy One

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Speechless*

How dare we presume to even address God. More often than not, it is a sign of our arrogance and irreverence. The problem is not a matter of the distance between the Creator and the creature, but rather a disparity in our relationship to the Holy One. Even the people of God through the ages recognized the overpowering presence of the Holy One (v. 4 and Rom. 11:32), communicated through visions, images, and icons. The Old Testament people, for example, were reluctant to use the name of God, a form of reverential avoidance. Some of the early Fathers referred to God in the negative, acknowledging what God is not. In our common everyday parlance we either dismiss the name of God altogether from our vocabulary or our consciousness, or we glibly refer to the Holy One with “God bless America” or address the Holy One with a finger raised as “the man upstairs.” We are, in effect, speechless before the “high and lofty” One (v. 1), who is beyond our grasp, as all of our attempts to approach the transcendent God are useless.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Lips Unclean*

Unable to approach God who eludes our grasp, we make God into something we can manipulate, an idol. Any old temple will do, as we attempt to fit God into the confines of reason or locate God in our established institutions, moral codes, and household idols, paying lip-service to God, with hearts, as Jesus said, quoting the prophet Isaiah, that are “far from me” (Matt. 15:8). Fatefully, we resist a vision of the Holy One, because we believe either that nothing is holy or that the holy is only of our choosing. Indeed, that is our un-holiness, each of us becoming, as Isaiah said, a people “of unclean lips,” living “among a people of unclean lips” (v. 5), an affront to the Holy One, a people void of praise.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Losing Out Altogether*

Losing a sense of our un-holiness, we lose our ability to experience terror in the presence of the Holy One, our capacity to fear God. Notice, the prophet was not just in awe of the Holy One, he was terrified, as he cried out, “Woe is me! I am lost” (v. 5). The author of the letter to the Hebrews also had no illusions about our fate before the One who alone is holy, when he wrote that, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Becoming sightless, speechless, and lifeless before “the high and lofty One” (v. 1), “the Lord of hosts” (v. 3), unable to hear “the voice of the Lord” (v. 8), we suffer a fate worse than death, altogether lost.

PROGNOSIS: Lifted by the Presence of the Holy One

Step 4: Final Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Healed From on High in the Here and Now*

But all is not lost! An amazing thing happens in Isaiah’s otherwise terrifying vision. One of the winged seraphs, leaving her post amid the Holies, flew to the prostrate prophet, and using tongs, touched his mouth with a live coal from the altar (v. 6-7a). The prophet comes alive, healed by the messenger of the Holy One, who said, “Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” (v. 7b). Who is it who comes from the Holiness above and beyond us to become our Brother, to touch our humanity with his and take our sin into himself in order to lift us as high as God is? Who, other than our Lord Jesus Christ, “the one who descended from heaven” (John 3:13), “the Son of Man lifted up” (John 3:14), that we “may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:14)? The unclean are healed, made whole by the Holy God, who says, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezek. 33:11), for “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you” (Ezek. 36: 25). Thus, the

Holy One has drawn near in Jesus, by sending him “in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, condemning sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). Jesus becomes “the live coal taken from the altar” (v. 6), the “Lord of Hosts” (v. 3), who heals us all by death on a cross and by resurrection from the tomb of death. Lifted by this good news, we are now standing before the most holy of mysteries, how God comes out from hiding with a presence that transforms the likes of an unworthy Roman centurion at the foot of the cross, (Luke 23:47), who experiences healing, overwhelmed by the righteousness of Jesus offered on his, and our, behalf.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Our Eyes Wide Open*

In the vision the prophet says, “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (v. 5)! Up to that point, what he has seen is the power of God’s presence that creates fear, a sense of woe and lost-ness. Then he sees that his sin and guilt have been burned away, the grace of God breaking through the smoke. Likewise, Nicodemus, standing before Jesus, the Holy God incarnate, heard the Lord say, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3), that rebirth happens only as God draws near in him, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the experience of the Holy One among us and in us. And so, by our faith we see God hidden in the humanity of our Lord, hidden in the cross and the empty tomb, hidden in the confessing church which is his body, hidden in the Sacraments where the living God touches sinful humanity, purifying our bodies, our eyes and ears and lips, our worship and work and play.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *With a Vision of Mission*

Having, then, such a healing vision, we get to become part of the revelation from on high, as we share the vision of the Holy One. The prophet responded to the voice of the Lord, who asked,

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (v. 8a), by saying flat-out, “Here am I; send me” (v. 8b), an amazing turnabout! As the prophet carried his message to his people, giving them a vision of hope in a time of judgment, so God today calls the church to action, to be a people with eyes to see, ears to hear, and consciences no longer dulled, (Matt. 13:14-15; Is. 6:10), moving into the world, like Jesus, to touch others, bringing healing to the lost, sight to the visionless, life to the dying, where God is hiding, that all the world might fall prostrate before the Holy One and then be lifted up to praise the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, world without end.

For further reading and reflection:

Paul Tillich, THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS, “The Experience of the Holy,” Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1950, p. 87

Edmund A. Steimle, GOD THE STRANGER, “God Far – God Near,” Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 45