

Holy Trinity Sunday

A HOLY GOD AND A HOLY PEOPLE

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

In 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: Terrified

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“The Year that King Uzziah Died” (6:1)*

The king has died. Will the transfer of power be planned and orderly or bloody and violent? We do not know what happened following the death of King Uzziah. However, such change surely was a crisis for the people of Judah. What could they count on? What could they believe in? What will sustain them in such a time of change and uncertainty? It was a time not unlike ours. We like they are ripe for a “holy” moment, in need of something lasting and transcendent to which our hearts can cling in a world where the foundation is shaking and doors are about to fly off their hinges.

Isaiah certainly had a “holy” moment. The Hebrew word for “holy,” *qadosh*, means “cut off” and “set apart.” In the temple (or was it a vision of being in the temple?) Isaiah had a “holy” encounter with God. It certainly was utterly unique and wholly unlike anything one could experience in this world. Here we truly see a God that is set apart, totally unique and unlike anyone or anything in this universe. It was a scene that would be the delight of any Hollywood special effects director, whose creativity would be stretched by the spectacular and supernatural phenomena of this passage.

There is smoke. There is an earthquake. The very doors of the temple shake in their hinges. There are these strange six winged, snake-like creatures called seraphs, flying about the place. Two wings cover their eyes because in the Old Testament God is so awesome and terrible that no one can dare to look God in the face. Two wings cover their feet (actually a Hebrew euphemism for genitals) because they are ashamed to be in the presence of such a Holy One. With two wings, they flutter around this sacred space chanting a song praising the God whose glory

fills the earth.

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The threefold “holy, holy, holy” has inspired many a church hymn extolling the virtues of the Holy Trinity. That may account for its selection as the First Reading on this Trinity Sunday. God is present sitting on the throne. However, Isaiah only sees the hem of God’s robe. God’s appearance remains a mystery. Isaiah either cannot or will not describe it. God is so unique, so unlike anything in human experience, so utterly other, so set apart and so holy that it is beyond words.

When such holy moments burst into our lives, we are reminded that life is not under our control. There are “gods” out there who occasionally shatter the carefully constructed lives we had built to protect our lives. We are shaken to the foundations and scramble for something that will “save” us from the chaos we fear is about to drown us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : “Unclean Lips” (6:5)

The holiness of God reminds us like it reminded Isaiah that we are not what we should be. The words that come out of our mouths and are shaped by our lips reveal what is in our hearts. We believe in the God who will judge us by our words and deeds. In the presence of a God like this, Isaiah is acutely aware of his unholiness. He is an unclean man with unclean lips in the midst of an unclean people. In the presence of the holy God that is like no other, Isaiah is face to face with his own sinfulness. In the presence of such perfection, he can only sense his imperfection. He is afraid, filled with terror, concerned for his very life. Being in the presence of such a holy God is NOT good news. It is NOT comforting. It is frightening, scary and

deadly.

Even though few if any of us have ever had an experience like Isaiah's, our experiences of the presence of God are still similar to Isaiah's. When we sense that we are in the presence of divinity, we like Isaiah shudder. We sense our inadequacy. We feel accused, guilty and the need to justify ourselves.

God knows and my kids repeatedly remind me that I am far from resembling divinity. Nevertheless, as the pastor I represent God and his presence. Therefore, when the pastor shows up at the party, people cannot help but feel slightly nervous and a little on edge. People always feel a little threatened, ill at ease, perhaps even a little guilty in the presence of the pastor. When the pastor shows up, someone always sounds the alarm. "Here comes the pastor. Watch your language. Clean up your act."

I would be a rich man if I had a dime for every time I have walked through the grocery store and met someone from my church. It may have been the farthest thing from my mind, but I always seem to get a litany of excuses as to why they have not been in church lately. I guess the presence of the pastor automatically makes people feel guilty, as if they are people of unclean lips, just like Isaiah, which, of course, they are.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : "Woe Is Me!" (6:5)

Such anxiety betrays a faith that is convinced that God is our judge and God will judge us on the basis of how we behave. If that is the God we trust, then that is the God we get. For people with unclean lips and unclean hearts, that is not good news. That is the God Isaiah saw in the temple in all of God's terrifying holiness.

There is long tradition in the Old Testament that a person cannot bear to see the face of God and survive. Maybe that is why Isaiah is still alive in the temple. He only saw the hem of

God's robe. But now that he has seen God in all God's glory, he is in trouble. He will surely die. "Woe is me!"

We too share this fate. The God we have is the God we get. "Woe is us!"

PROGNOSIS: Delighted

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *"A Live Coal"* (6:6)

However, just when Isaiah expects to get the God he deserves, Isaiah gets the God he does not deserve. Without warning or explanation, one of the seraphs flies to Isaiah holding in a pair of tongs a white-hot burning coal from the altar in the temple. The seraph touches the lips of Isaiah with the hot burning coal. Isaiah miraculously is not burned or harmed but is purged and cleansed of his sin. Isaiah had been convinced that the holiness of God was bad news for him, but it was just the opposite. The holiness of God is good news. That which sets God apart, cuts God off and makes God like no other is God's grace and mercy. That which makes God utterly unique is not just that God reads the riot act to sinners. There is nothing unique or unusual about that. Everyone in the world thinks that is what God is like. What makes God wholly holy is God's desire to be merciful and forgive sinners. When God does that for Isaiah . . . and us, we are stunned. We never expected or deserved a God like this. This God is like no other. This God is holy!

The white-hot coal looked like certain destruction. However, it foreshadowed Jesus' death on the cross. It seemed like just desserts for an out-of-control prophet who got too close to sinners and outcasts in the name of God. Therefore, when God shows up in those guardians of God's holiness, the religious establishment, Jesus gets burned. He deserved it. However, the white-hot coal of the cross is not what it seemed. Contrary to appearances, Jesus' death on the cross was God's great act of

love. Jesus' got burned "for us and our salvation." When the seraph said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out," it could just as well have been Jesus speaking to the countless sinners he befriended during his life.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : "Here Am I" (6:8)

After an encounter like this, Isaiah's heart is changed. Fear has turned to faith. Terror has become delight. "Woe is me" has become "Here am I!" Previously he had cowered in fear, like the kid hiding in the back of the classroom hoping that the teacher will never call on him. However, now he waves his hand, hoping to catch the attention of his teacher because he just cannot wait to offer his answer. God is no longer a holy threat hanging over his head. God is a holy hope holding a blessed future in his hands. We cannot wait to embrace it. We cannot but join the seraphs in singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" as we gather around the communion table. We are there with Isaiah in a holy place, where seraphs will place the white-hot burning coals of Jesus' body and blood to our lips. Like Isaiah, we will be seared, purified and forgiven our sins. The holy God will make us a holy people, set apart, sacred, special, . . . forgiven.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : "Send Me!" (6:8)

No longer terrified but delighted, we cannot help but live a holy life. Because we are a holy people, defined and set apart by the mercy of God, we are unafraid of the future. We embrace the holiness of God. We are ready to go and tell. Sent on a mission, we are ready to join the seraphs and carry the burning, live coal of Christ's love to a world in crisis, confused and confounded by the death of the latest King Uzziah. We get to touch the unclean lips of a world haunted by its failures and burdened with its sin with the mercy of Christ. We get to offer

hope to a world longing for certainty and for someone to trust when lies have made it cynical, skeptical and suspicious of everything. We get to take a disenchanted world to a holy place where it can meet a holy God and become a holy people.