

## The Thrice Holy God

Isaiah 6:1-8

Trinity Sunday

“Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.” This is the Word of the Lord.

### I. In the Temple

This story seems so far away from you and me in space and time. It’s the year that King Uzziah died – that’s nearly 3000 years ago. The prophet Isaiah’s vision takes place in the inner sanctum of the temple in Jerusalem. It’s called the **Holy of Holies**. He sees the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. Seraphim are flying above, attendants to the Lord Most High. As they fly, they call out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” The foundations of the temple are shaking to the bedrock. God Himself is present—Yahweh is in the house.

It sounds like one of those visions where you have two locations all mixed up together, the kind of scene that only works in dreams, like when you’re standing on a Caribbean beach and then you turn around and walk into your house here in Edmonton. But there’s a big reason why Isaiah sees this taking place inside the Most Holy Place of the temple, and it’s not just because the temple is associated with God. The Most Holy Place is not just a memorial: it is the Lord’s home on earth. When the temple was first completed and dedicated, the Lord appeared in a cloud of glory and descended into the Most Holy Place. The same Lord enthroned in heaven also dwelled for His people in the temple on earth. In a very real way, in Isaiah’s time the Most Holy Place is where heaven and earth come together, for the one true God is enthroned in both places.

It’s an awesome sight. Isaiah is standing in the presence of God Most High, looking at God Most Holy. And what is his reaction? It is not joy or excitement or laughter or relief. **It’s terror.** “Woe is me!” he cries out, a way of saying, “I am a dead man.” Why? He goes on: “For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

It’s like fire and water, like darkness and light: the one simply cannot continue to be in the presence of the other. Back in Exodus 33, the Lord declared that no one sinful could look upon His face and live; and indeed, as soon as Adam and Eve fell into sin, the Lord exiled them out of the Garden and away from His presence. When He descended on Mt. Sinai to give the Ten Commandments, the Lord told everyone to stay off the mountain, lest they die; later on, Moses and the elders ate in God’s presence, but only after a sacrifice was made. At any event, the Bible is full of demonstrations that sinful man cannot be in God’s glorious presence and live.

Isaiah is no dummy. With his knowledge of the Scriptures, he knows this, at least academically. But when confronted with the Lord enthroned in glory, it isn’t that he thinks back to Sunday School and says, “The Bible says that I should feel bad about this situation.” His reaction is immediate and based on what he sees: for as he looks upon the Lord in His holiness and glory, his own unholiness and sinfulness become far more apparent than ever before. The brighter the light, the more apparent are blemishes, stains and scars; the nearer to God’s glory, the more evident is man’s wretchedness and sinfulness. The contrast is unmistakable, and Isaiah knows that there is nothing he can do to make it any different. He is a dead man.

There is nothing he can do to make himself holy in the presence of God; but **the Lord** can do something. He sends a seraph, who takes a burning coal from the altar. The seraph touches the burning coal to Isaiah's lips and says, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for." The Lord takes Isaiah's sin away. The Lord makes him holy. Now, Isaiah can be in the presence of God and live. Now, Isaiah can speak God's holy Word: for the LORD has opened his lips, and Isaiah's mouth will show forth His praise.

## 2. At the Altar

One of the greatest problems that the Church encounters today is simply this: people have far too high an opinion of themselves. As long as this is true, they will see little need for Jesus.

Some of this is absolutely natural, as in the sinful nature. Blinded by sin, people cannot know how terribly unholy and apart from God they are. Furthermore, tempted by the devil to believe that they can be like God, people will find a way to justify the sins they commit, demonstrating one way or another why they're not guilty (in their opinion) of anything that deserves punishment. I remember a statistic a few years back that something like 78% of all drivers consider themselves above average (which always leaves me mystified that I so often end up behind the other 22%). But if drivers have too high an opinion of themselves, you can be certain that sinners will give themselves far too much credit and assign themselves way too much righteousness before God.

You see it in society. Our culture has made a god out of self-esteem: it teaches that the key to success is feeling good about yourself. This is a problem in education, where a prevalent philosophy seems to be that it is better to pass a child who doesn't know math, because to acknowledge his limitations might make him feel bad about himself. It is a huge problem in matters of society and morality, where many seem to buy into the idea that, "I'm basically a good person; so whatever I do must be basically good, too. If you object to something I do, it's not that I'm wrong or immoral. The problem is that you're intolerant." This presents a great danger in therapy, too: for rather than help a troubled person overcome a sinful behavior, a therapist might instead help the person feel good about the sin. This presents a threat to the Church: it's been suggested on more than one occasion that to teach original sin to children is a form of child abuse; in Canada, to say what the Bible says about homosexuality technically falls into the category of "hate speech."

But enough of the obvious examples in the world: if all we do is point out the troubles of other people, guess what will happen—we'll end up feeling better than them and pretty good about ourselves! The truth is, you have too high an opinion of yourself too. So do I. It's that old sinful nature at work, tempting us to believe that we're not that bad, that we're actually decent people. Now, by the grace of God, you and I are willing to confess with Scripture that we're sinful; but are we willing to confess how truly sinful we are? Do we realize how sinful we are?

We do well to remember the conclusion of Don Matzat, who struggled with this issue a few years back in his book, *Christ Esteem*. Partway through, he announced this life-changing discovery: "I did not feel good about myself, because I wasn't supposed to. I didn't have a negative self-image; I had a negative self. As an old joke put it, 'He didn't have an inferiority complex. He was simply inferior.'" We're not just inferior: we're sinful and completely undeserving of God's grace and mercy.

Peter provides us with an example. After teaching the crowds, Jesus provides Peter with a miraculous catch of fish—that’s a lot of wealth for a commercial fisherman like Peter. What is Peter’s immediate response to the miracle? It’s **not** joy or thankfulness. He declares to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” “Lord, go away?” The response might surprise you; but when Jesus shows His authority over the sea, Peter is suddenly conscious of the vast difference between the two of them. On the one hand, there’s the Son of God—incarnate, almighty and absolutely holy. On the other, there’s Peter—and the Lord’s holiness and power cast Peter’s sinfulness into sharp relief. So Peter says, “Depart from me!” Sinners shouldn’t be in the presence of God.

This gift of fish provides us with an opportunity for self-examination. God provides daily bread to you, and also to all the wicked. But, as we say in the Small Catechism, we pray “that God would lead us to know it, and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.” So how do you regard the things, the possessions that God has entrusted to you? Do you comfortably regard them as something you’ve earned, or do you rightly see them as undeserved mercy from the Lord? If they were all lost, would you be embittered toward the Lord for taking what is yours? Or would you be able to say by faith with Job, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord”? See, the more we recognize our sinfulness, the more we’ll be like Peter and acknowledge that all we have is undeserved.

Another example would be the Lord’s Supper. It’s no coincidence that we sing the words of the seraphim in Isaiah 6 just before the Holy Communion: “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth: heaven and earth are full of Thy glory!” We sing it for the same reason they did: we believe that God is just as present here. The same Lord who is enthroned in heaven is also present here: in, with and under bread and wine. He says so. Therefore, the Lord’s Supper is where heaven and earth come together today: it is a Most Holy Place where Jesus is present to save. So is the Baptismal Font. So is His Word of Absolution, public and private. The Lord is just as present here as He was with Peter in the boat, or with Isaiah in the temple. And as people thronged to wherever Jesus was for help and would give Him no rest, so we should hasten to His Word and Sacraments. Yet thronging to the Lord’s Supper—or His other means of grace—is rare today. As we take the time for proper preparation and examine ourselves, you and I should react to the Law like Peter and Isaiah did: “Woe is me! Because of my sin, I do not deserve to be in the presence of God.” However, feeling truly unworthy of the Supper is usually not the issue; too often, we’re tempted to feel entitled.

Please don’t misunderstand: the point of this sermon is not that you should run away from God. Rather, it is that you and I are in constant need of repentance for failing to acknowledge how sinful we are, how undeserving of grace and mercy we are. See, if we think we’re reasonably good people, we’ll also believe that we’re only partially sinful. If think we’re somewhat righteous on our own, we won’t be looking to the Lord to credit us with all of His righteousness.

The truth from Scripture, from God’s Law, sounds brutal to protesting sinful ears: we don’t deserve God’s presence and mercy. We’re far too sinful, and there’s nothing we can do about it.

But the **Lord** can do something about it, and He has. He’s gone to the cross in our place, died for our sin. He’s suffered the judgment for our sin so that God no longer holds our sin against us. Peter the sinner said, “Depart from me!” and Isaiah the sinner said, “Woe is me! For I am lost!” Jesus became sin for them on the cross, and He cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” For the

sake of Peter and Isaiah, the Father departed from the Son and forsook Him at the cross. For the sake of Peter and Isaiah, the Son was abandoned and condemned there.

But it wasn't just for Peter and Isaiah. It was for you, too. Jesus Christ became the sinner who was forsaken on the cross and cast from His Father's presence so that you might dwell with Him forever. As He said to Peter, so He says to you: "Do not be afraid." You need not fear God's wrath or hell for your sin anymore, because Christ has taken that wrath and hell and sin for you. "Do not be afraid," He says. Instead, you can be confident of God's grace and favor, for the sake of Jesus.

As He said to Isaiah, so the Lord says to you, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." The Lord no longer holds your sins against you. Instead, He forgives you. He makes you righteous. He welcomes you into His presence, now and forevermore.

There is no greater comfort or hope than this—but only for repentant sinners. Those who think too highly of themselves will find little comfort in the news of forgiveness now; and they will find no comfort in themselves on Judgment Day. But this is not for you: by the grace of God, you confess your sinfulness. You know it doesn't damage you to tell the truth about your sin, but instead frees you from the slavery that would have you try to make yourself righteous. And as you grow in faith, you're not surprised that you feel more sinful—for as you grow in faith, your recognition of sin will grow too; but so will the joy and the comfort of the forgiveness that the Lord gives.

Dear friends, the Lord has better for you than you feeling pretty good about yourself for a while. Confess your sins and your sinfulness beyond what you can comprehend; and rejoice to hear your Savior's words:

"Do not be afraid. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.