

Condemned, Cleansed, Commissioned

In the name of the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: Uzziah the king was dead. For most of his fifty two year reign, he had been a good leader for the nation of Judah. He fought successful campaigns against the Philistines and managed to put the eastern border nations of Moab and Edom under Judah's control, forcing them to pay annual tribute. He undertook a number of large building projects, a series of towers and fortifications that greatly enhanced the defensive strength of the nation. During this time the economy was booming; people were living comfortably. Unfortunately, in later years he let success go to his head. This caused him to enter a foolish war against the Northern Kingdom of Israel which ended in a humiliating and costly defeat for Judah. Worse for him personally, in his pride he took it upon himself to attempt to enter the Holy Place in the Temple in order to burn incense on the altar before the Lord – a task reserved only for priests of the tribe of Levi. As he was berating a group of priests for standing in his way, the Lord struck him with the dread disease of leprosy. He was forced to live out the rest of his days confined in a house separate from the royal palace.

But now he was dead, and his son Jotham reigned in his place. What kind of king would he be? No one knew for sure. They were sure that they were living in perilous times. From neighboring nations there were rumors of war. And there were threats of even more powerful forces looming on the horizon from Egypt and the rising Empire of Assyria. As a result, the Judean people lived with a sense of anxiety. They were worried about what the future might hold for them.

The prophet Isaiah also felt this concern. The Lord had already revealed to him some of what was going to happen in the years to come – and it wasn't good. He knew the hand of the Lord was going to come down hard and heavy on Judah because of the people's unfaithfulness, their idolatry, their perversions of justice, and their immorality. What Isaiah knew was coming was enough to lead him to despair.

And that (at least in part) is likely why the Lord gave him the vision we heard him describe in today's Old Testament reading. In it the prophet sees the Lord seated high and exalted in his Temple. The point is that the kings of this world come and go, nations and empires rise and fall, but the Lord is King forever. His reign never ends. His will is always done. His plans and purposes will be achieved. And his promises to the faithful cannot be thwarted. He will fulfill them.

Considering the vision in more detail, note that though Isaiah sees the Lord sitting on his high throne, he makes no attempt to describe his appearance. It's a sight too wonderful for the prophet to express in words. He only says that the sweeping train of his robe fills the temple. What stands out, though, is the prophet's sense of awe. Here is the God of the whole universe graciously condescending to make himself present and visible to a lowly person on earth. What's more, since the Lord is seen seated on a throne, it can safely be surmised that he appears in human form. And since there is only one person of the Holy Trinity who takes human likeness, we can say without doubt that Isaiah's vision is of the Son of God, the pre-incarnate Christ – the divine person who would actually become human in order to be our Savior from sin.

Flanking the Lord on two sides are the six-winged seraphim. They are angelic beings of the highest order. Their name means the “burning ones”. The indication is that their appearance is as fire, their wings and bodies translucent and glowing like flames. And what’s fascinating is that these angels who are ever present with the Lord share Isaiah’s sense of reverent awe. You’d think that being with the Lord always as they are, the novelty might wear off after a while; but no, they never lose their sense of wonder. And even these beings who are perfect in every sense dare not gaze directly upon the glory of the Lord, using as they do two of their six wings to cover their faces. With two wings they also cover their feet. There’s a message there too. In the ancient world a person’s feet were considered unclean – after all, they were pretty much always dirty from contact with the ground. And because of that, people had a general sense of shame about their feet. The point is this: even the angels who are sinless and whose feet don’t touch the ground cover them in modesty before the Lord. How much more should we who are by nature sinful and unclean come before the Lord in humility and awareness of our wretchedness? Finally, with two wings the seraphim are hovering above the Lord. It suggests that they are ever ready and willing at a moment’s notice to carry out any instructions they might receive to do the Lord’s bidding.

As they stand at the ready, they worship, crying out to one another in responsive verse, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” The thrice repeated “holy” immediately reminds us that the Lord our God exists as three distinct persons sharing the one divine essence – which admittedly is hard for us to understand because there’s nothing else we can compare him to. But there’s more going on here: to repeat an adjective three times is the way to express the superlative in the Hebrew language. So what these archangels are saying is that the Lord is the most holy of all. He is completely separate, unique, and unlike anything that belongs to the created order. And yet he graciously chooses to interact with us and let us know him as our kind and benevolent God. It’s astounding. They then refer to him as the “God of hosts” or as it’s sometimes stated, “God of Sabaoth”. This speaks of the Lord as the commander of a vast army of powerful angels. And this tells us two things. First, that his might has no limits; and secondly, that there’s a war going on – a war that he must one day win, but that for his own plans and purposes he has chosen not to end just yet. Finally, they say that his glory fills the earth. It’s true. The earth abounds with manifestations of God’s power, his creativity, his wisdom, and his infinite care for all that he has made. His fingerprints are on everything. We have only to look to see them.

That’s the prophet’s vision; but as wondrous as it is, what I want to focus on is how it affects Isaiah. His initial response is to be condemned by it. Moses once asked to see the Lord’s glory and he was told no: no sinner can see the Lord’s face and live. We just sang it in the hymn “though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see”. Isaiah does see. And he’s immediately overwhelmed with a crushing sense of his guilt and moral filthiness. He cries out in terror, “I’m dead! I’m completely undone—wiped out! For here I am a man of unclean lips living among people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the Lord, the King.” It’s remarkable: here’s a prophet of the Lord; probably as good and godly a man as there has ever been. And he has no doubt been faithfully observing the worship rituals and sacrifices that the Lord himself prescribed for his people; but when he actually sees the normally unseen spiritual realities going on behind the scenes, it’s too much for him. All he’s aware of is the truth that he is to the core a rotten sinner upon whom the Lord should bring swift judgment and destruction.

But that isn’t what happens. Instead, as Isaiah looks on trembling in fear and expecting at any moment to be cast straight into hell, one of the seraphim flies to the altar on which are burning coals for consuming the sacrifices of blood poured thereon. And it doesn’t say that Isaiah or any other human has offered a sacrifice. No, this appears to be a sacrifice that the Lord himself has prepared and offered and that is always present before him so that he who is

holy can dwell with those who are not. The angel then takes from this altar a live coal with a pair of tongs. He flies to Isaiah and touches it to the prophet's unclean mouth. And then the angel speaks the words of pure grace: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is covered."

Instantly the prophet feels the crushing weight of his guilt lifted. He is cleansed – made holy by the Lord. His terror vanishes. Now he, like the angels, is equipped, ready, and willing to do the Lord's work, so that when the Lord asks, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah immediately pipes up, "I'm right here. Send me!"

The Lord does send him. He commissions Isaiah to be his messenger to the nation of Judah, to proclaim his Word. It's a mission that won't be easy. The Lord tells Isaiah right up front that like the Lord himself, his Word to his people will be largely rejected: "Their hearts are hard and their ears are dull to hearing". Yet it is the Lord's gracious will to send his Word even to those who reject it. He is patient, not willing that any should perish; and if they do, they have only themselves to blame for their active, persistent, and stubborn refusal to hear the truth, to repent, and to turn to the Lord and live.

The good news is that some few will hear. The Lord always preserves a remnant of faithful people even when it seems the whole world has gone astray. And he keeps this remnant faithful by constantly taking them through the same three steps that Isaiah experienced when he saw the vision of the Lord in his Temple: first he condemns, then he cleanses, and finally he commissions.

This is why we gather here weekly. We are meeting with the Lord in his Temple. And though we don't see him in the same sense that Isaiah did – we walk by faith not by sight – he is very much present. And we do hear him. We hear him in his Word. We also hear him in our consciences – that ever-present voice in the back of the mind that tells you that you're not living up to the perfect standard of God's holy Law. This condemns us before the Lord and rightly causes us to fear his wrath and judgment. Thus, the Holy Spirit working through the Law written on our hearts brings us to repentance. We confess our sins.

And when we do, he is faithful and just to forgive us. We hear the pure Words of grace: that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, gave him to be lifted up on the cross like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. And then as a sign and seal of his gracious will, he sends his messenger to the altar where he picks up not a live coal, but the sacrifice of atonement itself: the body and blood of the Savior. He brings it to you, puts it in your mouth, and says, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." You are cleansed.

And finally he commissions you. He puts his thrice holy name on you and sends you out into the world, to be his light in the darkness, to be a witness of his truth in a world of lies. And no, it's not easy. There's a war going on out there, a war in which we seem to be hugely outnumbered. That's what we can see, anyway. It's what we can't see that matters. The Lord of hosts is with us. And he has promised to preserve us to the end. He will as he continues to do his gracious work of causing us to be condemned, cleansed, and commissioned to serve him in the vocations to which he's called us.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!