

“Holy, Holy, Holy”
Isaiah 6
Rev. Jim Alexander
March 21, 2021 • Sunday Morning Sermon

Isaiah 6:1–13 says [1] *In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. [2] Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. [3] And one called to another and said:*

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of His glory!”*

[4] *And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. [5] And I said: “Woe is me! 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!”*

[6] *Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. [7] And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”*

[8] *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”*

This is the end of the reading of God’s Word and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

This passages reminds me of one of my favorite hymns, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. It says;
*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*

*Holy, Holy, Holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Which wert and art and evermore shalt be.*

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;
Only Thou art holy—there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in pow’r, in love and purity.*

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.*

As I child I loved singing this hymn because I could sing it as loud as I could and seemed to always focus my attention on the holiness of God – who He is as well as what He does. It also made me wonder ‘what is it going to look like to worship God in heaven with no sin, no timidity

and nothing to hold us back, just all out, full on worship and praise.’ This is what we’ll get to see from this passage in this study.

In this Isaiah 6 passage, Isaiah is caught up in a vision where he is invited into corporate worship in heaven itself. He is caught up in throne room of God with the seraphim and there he is observing God being worshiped full on. Isaiah 6:1 says *[1] In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.* Right away he is begging us to understand that he has given us some context here, because the vision he is seeing comes to us in real time, in his real lifetime.

King Uzziah had been ruling for 52 years and had now passed away. So the time before Isaiah the Prophet was a time of transition, a time of uncertainty where a new king would assume full responsibility to lead Judah in the days ahead. Uzziah is rated as one of the good kings of Judah and he was such a solid king that when he was ruling he was able to expand the borders of Judah tremendously. Uzziah was able to fortify their defense and build fortification towers. He was even able to create something that would rain down arrows and rocks from the walls of Jerusalem down upon her enemies. Indeed he was a good king yet it was in this context, real time that a king is not on the throne and Isaiah is caught up in a vision in which he is going to see how authentic worship causes us to see the holiness of God.

Uzziah, having been a good king, unfortunately when he reaches the later years of his life as is seen in II Chronicles 26, sadly we learn that while he pursued God for much of his life when it came to the end pride overtook him. He became caught up with himself. He believed his own press and took it upon himself the responsibility that by mosaic law was reserved for only the priests. Uzziah went into the temple to offer incense at the altar of incense. When 80 priests led by Azariah encountered him, in an arrogant rage Uzziah took the censer (used to burn incense) as if he were going to strike them only for himself to be struck by God at that very moment with leprosy. From that moment until the day that he died he remained a leper, cast out from the palace, in another house as he was removed from the people of God and barred from entering the temple of the Lord.

This context of this historical moment is the moment that Isaiah receives the vision where there are present times of great uncertainty in transitions and he sees God not moved. The Lord is still sitting on His throne far from being in a panic or a terror, far from being reactionary to something that was going on around Him as if it would have caught God by surprise. So what is God doing? He is doing the exact thing He does always – He is sitting on His throne. To look at God sitting on His throne is to look at God as King and it’s also to look at God in His role as a Judge. God is about to exercise His Kingly prerogative as a Judge on Judah, on all the nations and even on His own people – those who loved Him and served Him. So here is the King seated on His throne, not touched by the winds of change blowing in Judah at the time, He is simply moving ahead and Isaiah the Prophet immediately sees God exalted.

God is high and lifted up. The train of His robe is filling the Temple and there is no room for anything else but the glory of God – the glory of the Lord who clothes Himself in light is clearly what Isaiah is to see. God is not the only one that Isaiah sees. Our passage turns us in Isaiah 6:2 to heavenly creatures simply identified by one word – seraphim. Isaiah 6:2 says *[2] Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.* The seraphim are standing above God who is on His throne and they are ready to serve to do His bidding at a moments notice. These are a class of angels who jobs description could well read – continually praises, worships and serves the Lord.

This Hebrew word we translate into seraphim is kind of a unique word. It literally means burning ones. This Isaiah 6 passage is the only passage in the Old Testament that refers to this creature as seraphim and it describes them as having faces, hands, feet, as well as wings. They are highly capable and even able to employ human speech to the point when they are to give a message to a human, they can understand what the seraphim says. They are described as brilliant as flaming fire which is symbolic of purity and of the power which is theirs as they serve the King of Kings. For them to be known as this brilliant flaming fire makes absolutely sense when you consider the Source of their brilliance. These angelic beings are continually in God's presence and they simply are reflecting the Shekinah glory of God Himself.

We are told the seraphim have wings where two of those wings covered their faces and not even these magnificent creatures could stand to look full on to the Shekinah glory of God. With two of their wings they covered their feet showing us the understanding of humility and service, where they were fully aware that they as sinless creatures were standing on holy ground. With two of their wings they flew ready to do God's bidding at a moment's notice. In the Lord's Prayer we pray – on earth as it is in heaven and it's interesting that we should pray that without applying it to this. When we ask for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are asking that we might be the same willing participants in His plan as these creatures are in Isaiah 6 – whatever You say Lord, I will do. Let's look further in the passage.

Isaiah 6:3 says [3] *And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!"* A better translation of this is that the one kept calling to another for this is an ongoing sound of the song they are lifting up. See here the holiness of God put on full display and the significance of this attribute, holy, could be easily missed. Some believe it could simply be pointing to the Trinitarian nature of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. It does remind us of the character and nature of God being in three Persons, but while it does make us think of this there is much more for us to see than just this.

When you write in Hebrew from right to left, which I don't do often, if you wanted to emphasize something there was no such thing as bold face font or italics or a way to underscore or highlight. So the way to make emphasis of something that was of great importance was to repeat it again and sometimes again. We see the great importance in Isaiah 6 of the holiness of God simply by repetition. R. C. Sproul said 'There is only one attribute of God that is ever raised to this third degree of repetition in Scripture. There is only one characteristic of Almighty God that is communicated in the superlative degree from the mouth of angels where the Bible doesn't simply say that God is holy or even that God is holy, holy but that He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy or justice, justice, justice.' The Bible says God is holy, holy, holy.

Holiness is the summary attribute of God. The entirety of His Divine perfection which separates Him from the creatures is holiness. He is entirely Other. He is set apart in every way from His creatures and especially set apart from their sin. Yet in this passage He has chosen His creation, the whole earth that is tainted and polluted by sin to be the theater or puts on display His holy Name. He displays His glory or the essence of who He is in all of His attributes for the whole earth, the entirety of His creation, is full of His glory.

So grand is His worship that Isaiah is privilege to become part of that in Isaiah 6:4 it says [4] *And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.* Even the in adamant parts of the Temple responded to the glowing swell of praise that was coming from the lips of these creatures and to the presence of this holy God.

The message was so great that the foundations quaked/trembled and the Temple was continually being filled with smoke which was a sign throughout both the Old and the New Testaments of the presence of God.

Having described the authentic worship having confronted Isaiah with the holiness of God, he moves next to how authentic worship moved him to the depths of his personal sin. Isaiah 6:5 says [5] *And I said: "Woe is me! 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!"* Humanly speaking, I guess it is possible Isaiah could have looked around at other Hebrew men of his day and thought he was doing okay. He might have even looked at the Prophets Jeremiah and Hosea who were his contemporaries in those days and felt like he was getting along just fine, but when he compared himself to the absolute holiness of God literally he was undone. There in the courtroom of heaven Isaiah has a 'come apart' in the face of God. Isaiah could do nothing but pronounce his own judgment, his own common condemnation.

In the opening five chapters of the book of Isaiah you will see that no less than seven times Isaiah has pronounced 'woe to Judah and Jerusalem!' The Hebrew word for woe is *oy*. Have you ever heard the Yiddish word *oy vay?* It is said when someone expresses 'Oh my this is awful.' This is awful for woe is condemnation. Woe is not a good thing and as Isaiah was pronouncing this to Judah he was pronouncing God's judgment upon this nation and the city of Jerusalem. Now here is this same Prophet with only being able to see the holiness of God, he can only see the depth of his sin and pronouncing the same condemnation on himself. He could do nothing about it.

As I was preparing for this study my wife, Pam reminded me of something so good. When our youngest daughter was about 4 or 5 years old we were sitting in a Presbyterian church and it came time for the confession of sin. My wife and I many times were either in the choir or leading worship and our daughter would be sitting with a friend and their parents. Suddenly we realize during the confession of sin the friend's mom is quietly leaning over and saying something to our daughter. Our daughter was making some noise and the mom simply reminded her that this was a time to be quiet and confess her sins. I'm thankful for those who will speak truth in love into my kid's lives no matter what, but my daughter looked back at her and said 'Mrs. Hall, I haven't sinned any today.' I guess we had some more teaching to do.

That is not the reaction of Isaiah. No one had to convince him or teach him that he had sinned. Before the holiness of God he is a sinner undone – I am a man of unclean lips, he says. In contrast to the sinless angelic beings that Isaiah had just witnessed, using their lips to give praise and adoration to God Almighty, he says he is a sinful man and he could not join in that song of praise. He realizes that sin blocks fellowship with God. The very instrument by which he is a Prophet who should give praise to God and call others to repentance in faith, is unclean and unfit for the task it is supposed to do.

It is actually a much deeper problem than that. Isaiah, the man of unclean lips, was simply looking ahead to what Jesus would teach us so clearly in Matthew 15:18 which says [18] *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.* Long before the Messiah came and uttered those words Isaiah understood that his lips were unclean because he had a deeper problem and that was that his heart was unclean. To make matters worse he realized his uncleanness came from the inside out not from the outside in. Isaiah was actually worse off than when Uzziah had been a leprous king. Uzziah at least had ways he could go to the priests and something to be done to deal with the issue of his skin but Isaiah, the Prophet of God is so undone before Him that there is no Old Testament sacrifice capable of

taking away his sin. At best, it can just be covered over. So Isaiah is broken, shattered before the Almighty God. That infinite gulf that Isaiah saw between God's holiness and his personal sinfulness left him in despair and without hope. Isaiah offers no excuses or attempts to justify for the only thing he can manage to do is speak words of self-condemnation and judgment over his sin. He can't even manage to throw himself at the mercy of the courts and ask for mercy or grace.

Here is a man of unclean lips living amongst a people of unclean lips and saw himself as a man sentenced to die for it was rightly understood in the Old Testament that if a man saw the King – the Yahweh of the heavenly hosts – he could not live. Here he had not only sin Him in his sin but he had seen some manifestation of God, but this is actually a good place for us to be in this passage, because when we get to the point where we see how authentic worship confronts us with the holiness of God and with the depth of the reality of our personal sin, we can also see how authentic worship comforts us with the enormity of grace. Let's continue in Isaiah 6.

Isaiah 6:6–7 says [6] *Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. [7] And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."* One of these magnificent, fiery creatures in immediate obedience to the will of God, because they only did what they were told for they didn't initiate anything in and of themselves, fulfilled the task as a ministering spirit sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation. This seraphim flew to Isaiah's aid. He didn't fly to him to banish him from this corporate worship but instead he flew with aid to do God's bidding to communicate God's mercy and grace.

This seraphim carried in his hand a red hot coal straight from the heavenly altar pointing both to the necessity of the shedding of blood for the remission of sin and the intercessory prayer of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit on the creatures behalf, he then takes this hot coal and touches it to Isaiah's lips. Then he wants Isaiah to clearly understand the sign he has just shown him which was his guilt was taken away and his sin was atoned for. It was not the coal that removed Isaiah's guilt nor the ashes that touched Isaiah's lips for these were but the signs of the things they signified. Isaiah was made holy by the pouring out of God's grace.

The message that accompanied the signs both insured he would understand and prevent him from misconstruing sometime down the road and just as the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism are signs understood by the preaching of God's Word so here Isaiah received both the sign along with its meaning so he wouldn't miss the enormity of God's grace. Isaiah saw between God's holiness and his depravity suddenly vanish from sight. The depth of the Prophet's sin had been removed by God's grace. The seraphim told him his guilt was taken away and his sin had been atoned.

This is not just Hebrew parallelism that is being employed here. This is a defined word for guilt and it's often translated iniquity. Iniquity comes not only to sin but the deed itself and the consequence. The word for sin is the word most often used as the broadest sense of the word. Isaiah was atoned from both the deed and the consequence. The message points Isaiah ahead to Christ to the propitiatory work that Jesus Christ would do on all our behalf who believe in Him. Jesus would come not just to be the Great High Priest but the perfect, spotless Lamb sacrificed so that we might be saved. Jesus would drink the cup of God's wrath to the fullest and satisfy, not appease, God's wrath so that we might enjoy God's grace.

Now with Isaiah's burden lifted he hears for the first time in this vision the voice of God, not the seraphim, and we see now how authentic worship compels Isaiah to grateful service. Isaiah 6:8 says [8] *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will*

go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." Here the Prophet Isaiah is restored and he is overjoyed at being forgiven. Isaiah hears the voice of God talking with him as the Divine counsel of God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – conferring together. We see the God of three Persons offering Isaiah something as a Trinitarian invitation. Isaiah has seen holiness, sinfulness, grace and he is now brought to a point of application. What is he going to do with it?

Isaiah hearing this invitation from the Lord as Abraham, Jacob and Samuel had done who had responded with these same words – Here I am, send me. The phrase ‘here I am’ isn’t simply present or accounted for, but it’s a complete phrase of willingness to do whatever God asks you to do. As you study the rest of Isaiah or even the rest of Isaiah 6 you will realize that when Isaiah was willing to do whatever God wanted him to do, he was given a very daunting task – he would preach to a people who would not hear. There would be no big church raised up from his ministry. By in large it would be a ministry that felt futile but he would be faithful, because he had seen the holiness of God. Authentic worship had shown him who God is, how deep his own sin was, how enormous God’s grace was personally and called him into service with the Almighty.

That brings me to the takeaway for this study. Think this through this week – seeing the absolute holiness of God leaves us utterly speechless in conviction of sin, while enabling us to respond to the enormity of grace with willing obedience in service to God. Let those words sink in. I’d like to now ask one question that perhaps you have asked yourself many times. How was worship this morning? I’m not asking for your opinion about how well the Scriptures were read, how the music was, the prayers that were offered or even how the sermon came across. I’m simply asking ‘how did you worship this morning?’ Did you worship authentically? Has God in His grace shown you something more of who He is in such a way that you are overwhelmed with the reality of God? In response to seeing the reality of God, are you now overwhelmed with the weight of your sin? I’m not talking about the sin you see in someone else or the sin you feel from someone else when they have sinned against you. Has God brought you up short personally so you see just how utterly removed from you He is really is and how utterly condemned you truly are where you have no excuse?

He is holy, holy, holy and I am not. But there is grace for I am clothed in His righteousness if I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and God. He has taken my sin upon Himself and given me His perfect righteousness in its place so I now stand in Him complete. I now before the Father’s eyes am perfect. Do realize how freeing that is? When we know God is holy and we are not, God has taken care of the problem, He has solved, made us right with Him through Jesus Christ His Son, then we are free now to really live – to serve, here am I. What would You like me to do? Help out in the nursery? Come alongside the 110 plus ministries here at the church? Get involved in one of the Bible studies? Turn in the faith promise commitment pledge so that we can benefit here and be a part of what God is doing? Here am I, send me.

What if God said ‘hey, you’re retired, you have extra time on your hands, you can still serve Me, why don’t you go on a short-term mission trip.’ What if it is simply going to your neighbor next door and giving a word of encouragement or a word of the Gospel so that they too might know peace with God through Jesus Christ the Lord. Here am I, send me. When we see the holiness of God for what it is and the sinfulness of our sin for all that it is, we can begin to grasp and live in the enormity of grace.

Perhaps today is the first time you have started to understand this saving grace, then yield to Him for you need a Savior and He still offers His love and forgiveness. Whether it is the

sanctifying grace that teaches us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age (Titus 2:12), God's grace is sufficient. So then [16] *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16). As you see grace as all you need, you will find yourself willing to do everything God asks. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, please help us for Your grace truly is sufficient. It is super sufficient for Lord You have made the way. Like Isaiah, we stand before You in our guilt and shame for there is nothing we can do in and of our selves to make ourselves right with You but Lord, thank You that You have done it already. You sent Jesus Christ to take Your wrath that we deserve upon Himself so that we might be clothed in His righteousness that we might stand in Him complete. Now, Lord help us to be willing and eager in service, ready to take on even greater tasks than You have already accomplished through this church in its years of ministry and service to You. Embolden us more and embolden us still that way this week that You want us to say 'yes Lord, I am more than willing to do that.' Lord, as we serve You, we will serve you as an eye to Your glory and we will give you praise, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

- I. Authentic Worship Confronts Us with the Holiness of God (1–4)
- II. Authentic Worship Confronts Us with the Depths of Our Sin (5)
- III. Authentic Worship Comforts Us with the Enormity of Grace (6–7)
- IV. Authentic Worship Compels Us to Grateful Service (8)

Life Takeaway

Seeing the absolute holiness of God leaves us utterly speechless in conviction of sin, while enabling us to respond to the enormity of grace with willing obedience in service to God.