

Fifth Sunday in Epiphany

February 10, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 6:1-8 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2** Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. **3** And they were calling to one another:

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

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5 “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. **7** With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

8 Then 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!”

“From Contaminated to Confident”

This week I heard from the director of dispatch for San Juan County about their hiring and training process. He related how rigorous and demanding the training is. It makes sense since you want someone calm under pressure on the other end of your 9-1-1 calls. But he told how they are able to eliminate some of the applicants immediately. Even after he told one prospective employee to make sure to show up on time, wear something other than pajamas, and bath before coming, that advice went completely ignored. This particular gentlemen showed up 10 minutes late for the interview and hadn't bothered to pay much attention to his clothes or hygiene. Now that might sound harsh for some of the people who are down on their luck and truly need a job. And if that gentlemen were selling you a cell phone, you might raise an eyebrow. But when he is dealing with people in crisis and needs to get them the proper emergency response, his preparedness for the interview are some definite red flags causing the director of dispatch to question whether he can actually handle the job.

Introspection, looking inside ourselves can be healthy. But if you are like me, there are times when we look at our lives and we question our abilities. Especially when it comes to doing something important that will benefit lots of other people and not just ourselves. We become self-conscious. We are filled with self doubt. Isaiah shows us the dangerous damage of the sinful contamination we contain inside. But when we look at God's Word to us in Isaiah chapter 6, see get something else. And yet he holds out for us God's cleansing. God's cleansing gives us confidence to serve him. God's cleansing brings us from contaminated to confident.

Isaiah chapter six begins with Isaiah relating the glimpse of God's glory he was privileged to see. He ties it to a specific time and date in history. When the Kingdom of Judah was at its peak of prosperity and peace unequalled since the time of King Solomon. The nation's power and influence were cruising at a pace that would make citizens believe things would always be good or getting better. But God needed to get their attention and grab ahold of their hearts by first making them a little uncomfortable. Actually, he had to make them so uncomfortable that they would question everything about their assumptions and the paths their lives were thoughtlessly taking. And Isaiah was his chosen messenger to get their attention and deliver that uncomfortable message to challenge their spiritual assumptions.

And so God first had to get Isaiah's attention. Isaiah gets to see a glimpse of God's glory adapted for a human audience. He tells us: **"I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple."** (Isaiah 6:1) The message Isaiah is commissioned to deliver to God's people is dominated by words of judgement and warning. So God's appearing to Isaiah has to emphasize his holiness. Isaiah sees God as both king and judge. And to give added effect, Isaiah gets to see Seraphs, personal, spiritual beings serving the Lord. They are in a position to serve their Lord. They show respect and awe in his presence by covering their faces and express humility and unworthiness by covering their feet. They use the remaining set of wings to fly showing their readiness to serve. Those seraphs, those spiritual servants have a message to get across to Isaiah. They call back and forth to each other: **"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."** (Isaiah 6:3)

There are places we can go that just take our breathe away. Places away from home or work or the ordinary routines of our daily lives that inspire awe and captivate every ounce of our attention. You can go to the mountains and find a pristine location. Almost untouched by human interference, it appears majestic and beautiful. Perfectly unspoiled. It takes your breathe away. You can go to ancestral homelands. No buildings. No debris. Just connecting you to generations after generations of history of what the land meant to your family.

And when you are in these beautiful, special, pristine locations sometimes you find things that don't belong. You are admiring a majestic view and suddenly spot a soda can. You are reflecting on what the land means to you and your heritage when you spot an abandoned bottle or old tire. Not only does that piece that doesn't belong there shock you out of your admiration for this amazing place, but it actually offends you that people would be so thoughtless as to contaminate a piece of God's creation in such a careless way.

Getting upset about something that didn't belong is exactly what happened to Isaiah. He was in this moment of bliss, seeing God's majesty and glory. He saw those seraphs and heard their holy sound. He even got the 4-D experience of feeling what was going on: **"At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."** (Isaiah 6:4) And while he was soaking this all in, he had a very profound reaction. He realized he didn't belong in this scene: **"Woe to me!... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."** (Isaiah 6:5)

It's typically the large scale environmental disasters get our attention and grab headlines. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The Gold King Mine spill. A foreign substance was unleashed where it didn't belong. It caused fear and anxiety. It lead people and animals to suffer. The uranium mining that led to so many people left with long term physical damage. The large scale contamination get our attention and raise our anger. But it's actually the smaller ones that are easier to overlook are actually more dangerous to us personally.

You might remember from Christmas and from the weeks leading up to Christmas, that when an angel appeared to a human being, the first thing they always said was, "Don't be afraid!" (Luke 1:13,30; 2:10) If people who encounter angels expects calamity, then what should be the natural reaction of someone who gets a glimpse at God's glory? God is complete perfection. His holiness means he doesn't depend on anyone or anything. It also means God is completely distinct from anything common or ordinary. God is completely separate and has to maintain his separation from anything that is even 1% impure or has even a slight hint of imperfection. God is a not only the divine King and holy Judge. God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:28,29). And so Isaiah's reaction is the most reasonable response to a glimpse into God's holiness and glory.

We know that certain parts of our economy are chugging along and some others are still struggling. There is one industry that has seen its business steadily increase. The identity management industry is booming. The internet gives people a sense of anonymity, like they can do and say whatever they want in the online world without it coming back to haunt them. Then they post pictures to prove it. In a survey taken in 2006, one in ten hiring managers admitted rejecting candidates because of things they discovered about them on the Internet. Today that ratio is now nine in ten.¹ That's why we need identity managers. We need services that can scour through the internet and remove anything unflattering. Anything that might damage our reputation whether posted yesterday or a decade ago.

But there is no scrubbing away of incriminating evidence when it comes to God. You and I were born into this world tainted with impurity. Every day we let sinful thoughts contaminate our minds, sinful words contaminate our lips, sinful actions contaminate our hands. Every moment we breathe in the contaminated spiritual air of a sinful world, influenced by the sinful contamination of the people around us like unseen toxic chemicals sticking to every surface of our being. We can try to run away. We can attempt to conceal our imperfections. We could settle for the average and ordinary and hope that gets us by with God. We could attempt to negotiate with God that we aren't perfect but we aren't as imperfect as some other people either. But none of our attempts will eliminate the contamination that sticks to us. There remains an infinite gulf between the holiness of God and the sinfulness he sees in us.

We have to cry out "Woe!" The first step for finding confidence to stand before God is acknowledgement. We have to acknowledge with Isaiah that we should be completely

¹ Jill Carattini "Bad Reputations." <https://www.rzim.org/read/a-slice-of-infinity/bad-reputations>

destroyed by the holiness of our God. We have to cry out “woe!” in conviction. The unflinching holiness of God and absolute glory of God convicts us of sinful contamination.

But that isn't the end of Isaiah. The seraph deals with Isaiah's uncleanness. Isaiah tells us what happened next: **“Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth.”** (Isaiah 6:6,7) Sometimes we have to be careful with biblical visions. Symbolism can easily be misinterpreted to say what it was never meant to say. But here we have a very convenient explanation: **“See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”** (Isaiah 6:7)

When we hear about sacrifices in the Old Testament, we want to remember the purposes behind those sacrifices. The Letter to the Hebrews gives this explanation: **“In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”** (Hebrews 9:22) That was a point God emphasized throughout the Old Testament (Leviticus 17:11). So when we hear about an altar in the Bible, God actually wants us to look head to his promised Messiah who came to shed his blood and accomplish the purification that centuries of sheep and bulls and goats could never do.

On the altar of the cross Jesus gave his pure heart for the uncleanness passed down to you from generation after generation. Jesus lived among sinners and ministered to the worst offenders, yet kept his life free from any earthly contamination. Jesus never let an impure thought contaminate his mind. No sinful word ever left his lips. And yet Jesus doesn't just boost your abilities or improve your capabilities to battle contamination. He doesn't offer you ways you can be more qualified to stand before God. His ruin on the cross means your freedom from the ruinous effects of sin on your standing before God. His guiltless lips speak the peace of his purifying forgiveness to your heart.

After the coal from the altar touched Isaiah, he was able to respond positively to God's call. When God asked for a volunteer to be his messenger, he was able to raise his hand eagerly to say: **“Here am I. Send me!”** (Isaiah 6:8) Isaiah went from ruined to raring to go.

About 10 years ago I was preparing to go to Africa to serve in missions. One of the things that struck me most was all of the shots and vaccinations I had to have in preparation to travel there. It was a little intimidating to think of all the bacterial and viral dangers awaiting. But it was also humbling to consider the medical advantages I was being given that so many people on that continent will never have. If a vaccine for Ebola were available and you had skills to be able to alleviate suffering after an outbreak, would you go? See, God didn't call Isaiah to retreat to some tower and blast out a message from a bullhorn. He commissioned him to go to other people contaminated by sin. He called him to bring the message that would be their cure.

And now God gives you the confidence for carrying out your calling comes from Christ's cleansing. The One who called you to faith is the same One who took away your iniquity. The One who calls you to go for him is the same One who atoned for your sins. God gives

you a pure heart to serve him: **“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”** (Hebrews 9:14) God calls you to a world of people contaminated by the doubt and self-consciousness that results from sin. God calls you to bring hope through Jesus: **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”** (1 Peter 3:15) God calls and gives you the confidence to answer just like Isaiah: **“Here am I. Send me!”** (Isaiah 6:8)

Jesus takes sinners from “woe!” to “wow!” Living in amazement of his cleansing gifts, God’s people don’t have to question their capabilities. God’s people answer God’s call. We serve God willingly and joyfully with the confidence that comes from Christ’s cleansing. Amen.