

Romans 8:12-17
Isaiah 6:1-8

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009

Cleansed and Called

Isaiah has an awesome vision of God and is called to be a prophet in response to that vision. Isaiah is the only prophet who claims he receives his authority directly from God. Every symbol in Isaiah's vision is important. Because of their inability to listen to God's warnings, the Israelites need to be shaken by a vision of the Lord which reinforces God's power over everyone, especially them.

Historically, nations turn against God, but His will prevails. People turn from Him to worship idols, but their false gods crumble. Even God's people refuse to trust Him, but they do not escape punishment. Through all this, our powerful Lord promises to preserve the chosen people of Israel. Isaiah reminds us the Lord is in control of human history.

God's power and authority are not the main focuses of God's character in Isaiah's vision. First is the holiness of the Lord which Isaiah senses. Sovereignty is the most powerful nature of God. Holiness is the moral character of God. He is pure; He is complete; He is whole. R.C. Sproul, in his book *The Holiness of God*, says that holiness is the only attribute of God which is presented in the superlative. When God's holiness is praised by the seraphim in their chorus, they sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy." We can picture and understand why the seraphim use their wings to cover their feet and faces. Even without sin, they are unable to have the holy God look on them. God alone is holy. Moses has a similar experience. When he asks God to be able

to see His glory, God answers, “I will make all My goodness pass before you . . . but you cannot see My face . . . and live.”

Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, gives us a hint as to Isaiah’s response to the presence of God, to His sovereign will, His holy character, and His glorious works. He suggests we are, at best, attracted to and repelled from God at the same time. We tremble with fear and awe, but we are also fascinated by God’s holiness which is attractive, desirable, promising, and compelling. Peter calls this reverential fear.

Our worship should not begin with a focus on ourselves and our own needs but on the character of God. We should wait in God’s holy presence until He comes and should come anticipating a glimpse of His glory. In His holy and glorious presence, our holiness begins. God wants us to be holy as He is holy. So we who worship in reverential fear will follow after holiness in our character and walk cautiously in our conduct.

In God’s holy presence, Isaiah is acutely aware of his own sinfulness. His heart causes him to cry out in confession. Three uncomfortable and unpopular truths appear in his confession. First, when we see our holy God, we feel anguish for our own sin. Isaiah admits he feels unworthy to join the seraphim in singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy!” Whenever we see the Lord of Hosts, our sinfulness is exposed. We experience agony in our souls, the stab of conscience, the shame of inward uncleanness, remorse for our sin, and the sensation of being lost and alone.

A second agonizing truth is in Isaiah's response. When Isaiah sees God, he accepts responsibility for his sin. He feels he has no place in God's presence, no right to praise God, and no authority to speak for God. Yet Isaiah is called to speak for God. He worries that his mouth will betray the sin in his heart. Every preacher, teacher, and believer of the Word of God feels the same way. We sometimes fail to accept responsibility for our sins. Isaiah reminds us that in the presence of the Holy Lord, only we are responsible for the unclean mouths that betray the sins of our hearts.

The third truth is that sin has another dimension. Even though sin is basically personal, we cannot deny sin has a social impact. We can see the penetrating influence of our sin when we see God. The very extent of our sin can be frightening. Until Isaiah confesses his sin, he is neither ready nor worthy to be called a prophet of God.

After Isaiah's confession, fire is the metaphor which again grabs our attention. In the image of a coal of fire on Isaiah's lips, there is something more uncomfortable for contemporary Christians to be aware of. If our spiritual cleansing is partial, then our spiritual consecration is dull and our spiritual commitment is shaky. God has a word for us in Isaiah's vision. That word is FIRE!

A live coal from the altar of incense which burns in the presence of God is the only answer for Isaiah's uncleanness after seeing the glory of the Holy God. The image of the cleansing fire erases any doubt about the reality and fatality of human sin. Only the fire of God can remove our guilt. Only the white heat of a live coal from God's altar can atone for our sin.

We do not want to admit our sins require that kind of punishment. A live coal from God's altar reminds us that behind the love which takes away our guilt and the forgiveness of our sins is the Cross on which Christ gives His life for us.

Once Isaiah is touched by the fire which purifies him, he is ready to hear God speak with the fire which impassions him. Passion is another of those missing dimensions in many contemporary Christians. The cleansing of Isaiah's mouth enables him to speak to Israel, but only because that cleansing comes from God and only because God directs Isaiah's speech. Prophetic preaching is a gift of God, and does not come from human insight and intelligence.

After celebrating the freshness of the Holy Spirit's becoming a part of Christ's followers on Pentecost, the church now responds to its call to mission, which may be risky at first. Christ's faithful people understand that mission becomes a principal way for expressing God's redemptive presence in our human lives.

The mood of this passage suggests "awe." Our holy God takes the initiative to address a weak and sinful mortal, and the prophet is almost paralyzed with a sense of God's power and his own inadequacy. The sense of mission of God's people flows out of God and His understanding. The seraphim shield themselves before God's majesty. Only the live coal, symbol of the justice and compassion of God, serves to purify the prophet and make him fit for service for the King of majesty.

The coal which touches Isaiah purifies him in a similar way as the fire of the Holy Spirit ignites the disciples at Pentecost. To be baptized by fire means to be ignited with the positive energy of righteousness, a consuming flame of purity. When Isaiah answers, “Here am I! Send me,” he becomes part of a fellowship which sweeps the world. When we say, “Here am I; send me,” we, too, become ignited with the passionate blaze of the consuming Spirit. Satan flees before people who give themselves to be ignited by the fire of God. When our lips are touched with a live coal from God’s altar, we are not only cleansed from our sin, but we are also set aflame to be, in Paul’s words to the Romans, aglow with the Spirit.

The act of cleansing restores wholeness to us who sin. But it also releases our power to hear God’s speech, and, in turn, to speak God’s words to others who sin. Isaiah is released to spread God’s word, and so is the church.

May we receive the fire of God’s coal to cleanse us and the fire of the Holy Spirit to ignite us to spread God’s message of love and forgiveness to everyone we meet. May God send us out as He sends out Isaiah. May we accept the challenge of rebuilding the church and of being in a closer fellowship with God and others. Amen!