

“The Holiness of God”

Holy Trinity

Isaiah 6:1-8

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the earth is full of his glory” Isaiah 6:3

In their Seminary training at one of our two synodical seminaries future pastors take all kinds of classes designed to prepare them for the Pastoral Ministry. Through these classes professors prepare students to carry out a future Ministry that is faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Through these classes professors prepare future Pastors to think theologically through the many different situations they might encounter in Parish Ministry. One class that I had during my first year of studies was called Hermeneutics. It is a fancy term that refers to the task of interpretation. In the Seminary context the word refers to principles for interpreting the Bible.

Among the many assignments that the professor gave throughout that course was the task of searching the New Testament Scriptures to see what God, through the New Testament writers, is calling his people to be and do. I want to tell you more about this particular project for our purpose in the sermon this morning.

The Greek word for the verb, “to call,” is *kaleo*. The professor asked us to look up the many occurrences of that Greek verb and to write down the different grammatical objects or words that follow it. In other words, “What do these writers believe that we as God’s people are called to be and do?” Before he let us loose to pursue this assignment he asked us to give him our guesses as to what we think our research will unveil. Most students, myself included, were thinking in terms of Jesus’ Great Commission to his eleven disciples in Matthew, chapter twenty-eight, to “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19-20). Surely, we thought, that the New Testament writers are most often reminding and exhorting God’s people of their calling to evangelize and spread the Good news of Jesus Christ. After all, this is what we were training to do. Pastors continually encourage parishioners in the task of evangelism. Many parishes, Atonement included, have Evangelism boards.

My fellow students and I engaged in our project and what we found surprised us. What we found is that the New Testament writers are not typically exhorting and reminding God’s people of their calling to evangelize and spread the Good news. Rather, the word or concept that often follows the verb “to call” in Greek is, “holy.” Most frequently, through the writers of the New Testament, God is calling his people to be holy and carry forth acts of holiness. Evangelism then takes place as God’s holy people live holy lives.

This Trinity Sunday we, the Church, remember that we have a holy God. We echo with the angels in our Old Testament reading, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3). Our God is holy. His people are to be holy. The Ten Commandments that our Lord gave to his

people through Moses are an expression of his holiness and a representation of his holy Will. As the writer of Leviticus writes in a resounding refrain that saturates the whole book, “Be holy as I am holy” (Leviticus 19:2ff.). But holy we are not!

In our Old Testament reading the prophet Isaiah is confronted with a vision of our holy God. He says, “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. 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 . . . 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’” (Isaiah 6:1-2, 5)! Isaiah finds himself in the presence of the Lord and he cannot but admit the truth, “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 . . .” (Isaiah 6:5). The Lord is holy and his people are not.

In Christian Churches the sanctuary is a holy place. Holy means “set apart and different from.” The sanctuary is a place that is “set apart and different from” other spaces. It is a space that is set aside for God’s Ministry of Word and Sacrament. It is the place where we encounter the presence of our holy God through Jesus Christ. And when we come into this holy place to encounter our holy God, we, like Isaiah, cannot but admit the truth, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips . . .” (Isaiah 6:5). The Lord is holy and we are not.

In the presence of the Lord and before his glory we are all accused. This is the reason why our Divine Service, especially on communion Sundays, begins with the service of confession. Our real condition is then clearly seen. We name it. “I am sinful and unclean.” “I have sinned in thought, word, and deed.” Our unholiness is seen before God’s holiness.

The holiness of God is first and foremost Law—it accuses us and puts us on our knees. This is what we are reminded of in our Old Testament reading with the call of Isaiah. God is holy and we are unholy. We are unclean. Unclean and holy are opposite and must never be with each other. They must be kept far apart.

But the holiness of God also functions as Gospel—it wipes away and removes sin from its presence. This points us to Christ and the function of his atoning work for us. Through Christ our holy God removes sin and unholiness and impurity. Our Sunday morning Divine Service then functions not as entertainment. Not to satisfy preferences. But to bring us into the holy presence of our holy God where we are made clean and purified through the hearing of the Word of God and the reception of his Sacraments.

In our Old Testament reading Isaiah admits his sinful, unclean, and unholy condition. Then the Lord responds. He sends one of his angels armed with the power to purify. “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for’” (Isaiah 6:6-7). As I have heard one person put it, “the Holy God holies Isaiah!”

And so our holy God holies you! The coal is a sacramental coal. So also we are found in Christ as his baptized, believing children. Our sin is washed away and we are cleansed through water, bread and wine, and words of absolution. Especially in the Lord's Supper our Lord touches our lips with his purifying, cleansing, and forgiving body and blood.

In the Old Testament reading Isaiah was purified and cleansed through a coal that delivered the grace and mercy of our holy God. Particularly, we learn that his lips were cleansed and purified. Then with clean lips Isaiah is sent forth to speak and represent the Lord. We too, with clean lips, are sent forth to represent the Lord and be his spokespeople. God doesn't coerce, he asks for volunteers. And why would we not volunteer? We are called to be a holy people and to speak and do holy things. We are sent forth to bear the holiness of God in thought, word and deed. And God will use it as law and gospel. The holiness of our triune God will reveal our unholiness. And the holiness of our God will be revealed in Christ through Word and Sacrament to remove our unholiness. Living in Christ we go forth as clean, purified, forgiven and holy people. Called to be holy. Called to belong to our holy, triune God. Amen.