

“Purified”

Isaiah 6:1-8

There aren't enough words to describe everything that happened that day.

Isaiah was mourning the loss of King Uzziah on a number of levels. Uzziah had been a good king, then a proud king, then a rebellious king, and finally a king with leprosy. Isaiah grieved for the loss of good King Uzziah and for his failures as much as he grieved his death. Isaiah's heart had been heavy for some time.

The vision of the LORD came out of nowhere. Isaiah wasn't looking for it and hadn't planned on it, but it was certainly glorious. The visions and the wonders, the scenes and the sounds, the spectacle and the grandeur took his breath away.

It also made Isaiah uneasy. In fact, the longer he watched, the more the vision prompted a sense of sinfulness and uncleanness. He became acutely aware of his failures and shortcomings, and of his self-righteousness and his flawed humanity.

He wanted to run. He wanted to hide. But there he was, in the middle of a vision of a smoke-filled temple, in the company of praising and flying angels, in the midst of the very presence of the LORD of Hosts. There was nowhere else to go.

And before he could stop himself, Isaiah blurted out the words and feelings of guilt and shame that come with being in God's presence:

“Woe is me, for I am ruined.
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.”

“Woe is me.” What was Isaiah feeling in the moment? Well, take the embarrassment of being caught for doing something wrong and wrap it up with the sorrow of disappointing someone you love. Add to that the wounded-ness that comes from a broken heart and the sense of nakedness of being fully exposed. Combine all that and you'll begin to get a glimpse of what Isaiah felt when he saw the LORD. What else could he say but, “I've had it. I'm done.”

Well, we know the rest of the story, don't we? If we've been around the church for any length of time we know how things turn out. Besides, we just finished reading the passage a bit ago, and I know you were listening. So, now is as good a time as any to change the direction of the message. Now is a good time to remind us that even though the narrative is told from Isaiah's vantage point, he is not the star of the story. He's not. The angel's are not. Uzziah is not and neither is the tribe of Judah.

The vision with all of its wonder, the imagery with all of its meaning, the calling with all of its promise, and the prophecy with all of its troubles – everything that happens in this chapter points to the Lord. The passage declares the glory and majesty of our holy God and his love for all humanity.

This God is a God who had chosen to reveal Himself to a disobedient king and his disobedient people. He is a God who intentionally intersects with this prophet-in-the-making. This God makes it possible for that prophet to fulfill his calling. He is a God who cares more about the nation of Israel than they care about Him, and

takes steps to bring them to Him. He is the Lord, seated on his throne, lofty and exalted. He is the God whom the angels praised as “Holy, Holy, Holy.” He is Yahweh Saboath – the LORD of hosts. The passage declares the glory and majesty of our holy God and his love for all humanity.

But why should we care about what this passage declares?

What does it have to do with us?

First, it matters because it tells us God is holy. And we know that not just because the angels say so. One commentator put it this way, “Here is the One who is ethically pure, absolutely upright, utterly true” (Oswalt, 181). Another wrote that God “reveals his holiness by his decisions and his actions” (Watts, 74). Throughout the book that bears his name, the prophet Isaiah declares “thus says the LORD” to the tribe of Judah. God takes the first step throughout the prophecies. He longs for his people to listen to his promises and his warnings. He wants them to be a blessed nation so the whole world will be blessed through them. God is holy - ethically pure, absolutely upright, utterly true - and we see it in everything he says and does.

And it should be said here that there isn't some definition of "holy" that God has to measure up to. God defines by his character and by his behavior what it means to be holy. Everyone and everything else is measured against Him.

We also know from this passage that God wants all of us to be holy. No exceptions. Everyone in this room. Everyone we know. And all the rest of the folks we don't know. From the time of the Fall through the end of the age, it is God's intention that every human being becomes whole and holy. So he makes himself known to us. He reveals himself to us so that there's no mistaking what he wants us to be when he says, "You shall be holy unto me, for I the LORD am holy. (Leviticus 20:26 NKJV)"

One commentator said it best: "God does not reveal himself [to us] to destroy us, but rather to redeem us" (Oswalt, 184). Think about Isaiah again. No reason he should have been still standing except that God chose to make it so. And think of all the other accounts in the Bible of when God makes himself known to men and women so that he can redeem them.

He appeared to Abraham and wrestled with Jacob. He spoke to Moses in a burning bush and walked in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

He made his presence known to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. He made his will known to Mary, the mother of Jesus. He revealed his glory to the first martyr, Stephen, and then let Paul hear his voice on the road to Damascus

Ultimately he revealed himself through his Son. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

God does not reveal himself to us to destroy us, but to redeem us.

Finally, this passage tells us that this holy God who wants all of us to be holy will do what it takes to purify us. In Isaiah’s case, it was a hot coal off the altar. For all of us it was a cross and a resurrection. For the early Church it was the day of Pentecost. God will do what it takes to purify us.

I heard this put another way this past Sunday. The text for my pastor's message came from the apostle Paul's closing words in 1 Thessalonians,

“May God himself, the God of peace,
sanctify you through and through.

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless
at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

(1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 NIV)

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So what do we do now? What do we do now with what we know?

Our understandings of God are wide and varied. Some of us have known him (or known about him) for a long time. While we're aware that we're just getting started, we've come to learn many things about God. And they are a wonder.

Some of us have only recently gotten acquainted with God. We're not sure of much about Him, except we know that we want to know Him more.

But even though our understandings of God may vary, there is one thing that all of us know for sure: however little or much we know of God, we know that we're not like him. We know that there are miles between whom He is and who we are. As one writer put it, "In the presence of God degrees of sin become irrelevant. It is the holiness of God which reveals to us our true condition, not our comparison with others" (Webb, 60).

Acknowledging the difference between God and us brings us to a point of decision. What will we do now that we know - again - that God is holy and we are not? What will we do now that we know - again - that God is complete and we are in process? What will we do now that we know - again - that God is pure and we need to be purified? What will we do now?

While studying for this message I came across some keen insight into all that took place the day Isaiah had a vision of the LORD. The writer described what happened then, but he also describes what happens now. He wrote:

When God takes away the iniquity and sin in which we have lived for years, the experience is a wrenching and searing

one. But more deeply, what causes sin and iniquity? It is that arrogant self-sufficiency which refuses to bow the knee. That is the ultimate uncleanness of which Isaiah had been accusing his people and now finds resident in himself. This spirit never gives up without a fight. Apart from the fires of self-surrender and divine surgery, the clean heart is an impossibility. (Oswalt, 185).

Isaiah declared, "I am ruined" but God said, "No you're not. Let me purify you." And He did.

What will we say to the Lord of Hosts? Are we willing to go through the "fires of self-surrender"? Are we open to God's divine surgery? What will we say to the holy God who wants all of us to be holy and who will do what it takes to purify us?

"Here am I Lord . . . purify me!"

Works Cited

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- Webb, Barry G. *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings*. Madison: InterVarsity Press, 1997.