

“When In the Presence of God”

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

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The commissioning of Isaiah is one of the classic passages of Scripture. If there were a greatest hits album of Bible stories, this would probably be on there. It's dramatic and powerful, with an unexpected appearance by the Lord Himself, attended by glorious, otherworldly angels, and the giving of a mission to one of the greatest prophets in history. It's the kind of story that's fun to imagine, even though you know the picture in your head can't really do it justice. And it's fitting for our purposes today, because today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday of the church calendar when many Christians celebrate the Trinitarian nature of our God, and in this passage we get hints of the fact that a revelation of our God in His fullness is simply too much for our senses to take in, and we get the lovely three-part declaration of His holiness by the attendant seraphim.

But it's also kind of an odd passage of Scripture, because it seems like the sort of thing that should come right at the very beginning of a book. Our biblical book of Isaiah is made up of sermons and prophecies and events from the life of Isaiah (and maybe some of his students), and so it would seem logical to us to put the story of how Isaiah got his start at, well, the start of the story. But that's not what we find: this is in chapter 6, not in chapter 1, and in those first five chapters we have all kinds of meaty things. For those of us who live in the systematic, logical modern world, we like our stories to begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop.

But there is a logic to this passage, though it might not be obvious. This commission of Isaiah, though it's obviously a major event in his life, isn't really the start of his career as a prophet. There are some clues in the text that he was preaching for at least a few years before this event, first of all, but more than that, this is the beginning of a special commission for him to preach a particular message during his career. And, in fact, this commission follows out of what we see happening in those first five chapters.

It's not a happy situation. There are a number of messages in these chapters that show that God's people are getting very near the point of no return. They have so consistently rejected God for so long that God is very close to removing His protection from them. At some points the scene shifts to a courtroom with God bringing His case against them, and the case is pretty solid. They have allowed corruption to infect their nation from top to bottom, so that the leaders lead the people in the wrong paths, and the people wouldn't follow them in the right paths anyway.

Pride and selfishness abound, and that selfishness is impacting everything from their religious practice to their care for others. Their religion is characterized by whatever works for them: rather than being wholly devoted to the Lord and trusting in His love and power alone, they're hedging their bets by including lots of other gods in their worship as well. They're following the form of worship with their sacrifices and holy days, but they're lacking any of the content or the commitment that those rituals were meant to uphold. And several times Isaiah makes it clear that people are so focused on their own happiness and success that they're willing to trample others to get it. Their justice system is stacked in favor of those who can afford to pay bribes, their rich keep building bigger and bigger houses and accumulating more and more land until there's no room for people to live, and they spend their time in parties and drinking contests to pass the time.

They have, in other words, elevated themselves and their desires to the highest degree. They have lifted up all kinds of mountains to worship all kinds of things on. But this is a court case, and God brings His judgment, and it's not an encouraging thing. All those other mountains they've lifted up will be cast down, and the Lord will lift up His own holy mountain in their place. The proud and lofty will be humbled, and those who have been oppressed will be given justice. Isaiah gives us the evocative image of the formerly arrogant fleeing into caves and holes in the ground, and their precious gold and silver idols of false gods will be cast aside for rodents and bats in the dark places. What had been elevated is now hiding in a hole, and the one who had been ignored and forgotten is now lifted up to His rightful place of worship.

In chapter 5, God portrays Himself as the owner of a vineyard, one who did everything right to protect and provide for His precious vines, but they refused to produce good fruit. The fault therefore lies not with the vineyard owner, but with the vines, and the only recourse would seem to be to remove their protection and let the land lie fallow. The reckoning will not be pleasant. The land, the people, and their cities will face a terrible re-ordering as God makes things right.

And on that note, we turn the page to chapter 6, when Isaiah says that he "saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the hem of His robe filled the temple." It's a terrible moment, and after those first few chapters and the case God has brought against His people, Isaiah is right to cry out, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" The temple of a god was not merely a center for religious worship, it was seen as that god's palace, where they had their throne, from which they ruled their realm and dispensed their justice. God has explained what will happen when the Day of the Lord comes, and now Isaiah sees that the Lord is sitting in judgment. Woe indeed, since it would seem that time has now run out.

But of course this is only chapter 6 of a 66 chapter book, so we know that time hasn't *quite* run out. It's a sobering moment, but it's not the end. The Lord asks a question: He's looking for someone to send out with a message, and the message is certainly not all sunshine and daisies, but it *is* a message of warning, which means there's hope.

So what does all of this have to do with Trinity Sunday, since this vision of God doesn't really appear triune? Sure, the angels say "holy" three times, but that's kind of a stretch. And sure, God says "who will go for *us*?" but that has more to do with using the language of a royal court than it does any sort of hint of trinity. No, we see the Trinitarian nature of God pointed at in other places in Scripture, and developed more fully in the centuries after the last book of the Bible was completed. But what this passage does illuminate for us is what happens when God is present, when God reveals who He is, when He comes to make things right and rules from His throne.

Because the doctrine of the Trinity, though it seems complicated and academic and maybe even irrelevant, is a deep revelation of the nature of our God. It is one of the ways He has shown us who He is in His majesty. Like the revelation of God to Isaiah, this revelation of God as Trinity brings things into perspective. He has shown us that there is and always has been only one God, but God exists eternally in three persons. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are three persons, and yet they are one God. Jesus is God the Son in human flesh; He is God, and yet He is not the Father or the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God; He is not the Son or the Father, and He is not merely an

impersonal force. God the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, and neither is He the chief God or the boss or the head. The persons of the Trinity exist in perfect love and unity, with no hierarchy or dissension between them.

This is God revealing more to us than we're able to handle or comprehend. We do our best to work out the words to accurately describe God, but we can't really make sense of it. I am one person with one essence, and we are many people with many essences, but God is three persons with one essence. It is like the moment when Isaiah looks into the temple and sees this massive building, one of the wonders of the world, filled with nothing more than the hem of God's robe. The message is that this God clearly cannot be contained by any building, no matter how grand it is. He is attended by seraphim, literally "burning ones," terrifying creatures of legend that, glorious though they are, must use their wings to protect themselves from God's overwhelming glory.

The fact that God reveals Himself to us, that God is present enough to want us to begin to perceive Him, and that His presence so defies description or comprehension, puts our selfishness in perspective. The presence of such a God reveals the pettiness and shallowness of our greed, our gluttony, and our self-indulgence. Isaiah lived in a time when people were willing to trample one another, to take advantage of the defenseless, in order to satisfy their own selfish desires. And then Isaiah sees the glory of God, whose power and majesty are indescribable. A God who is triune, whose very description breaks our language, shows that our focus on ourselves is simply too small. The presence of a God who is so far beyond us reveals our selfishness as being pathetic and sad. We read part of Romans 8, a passage that speaks of how the full revelation of our triune God works in our salvation. Paul says that "if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you." And so the presence and the work of God leaves us with an obligation to live by God's Spirit, not according to the flesh.

What's more, this revelation that such a God is present puts our superstition in perspective. We can't live in a superstitious fear of God, as though He can be managed or appeased through simple rituals or childish beliefs. Isaiah was preaching to people who thought that they could get away with adding a few other gods to their worship, just to cover their bases. And they thought that the Lord wouldn't really mind if they went through the motions of worshipping Him, just to keep Him on their good side. But when such a God reveals Himself to you, how can you think that some carved idol will do you any good? How can you think that such a God won't notice if you're just going through the motions? How can you think that such a God can be so easily controlled and contained and made to dance to our tunes? Paul says that "the Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to becoming a child of God. And by Him we cry, *Abba*, Father." The revelation of such a God changes the nature of our relationship to Him.

The presence of such a God also puts our aimlessness in perspective. People today live in a state of wondering what the point of it all is. We have accomplished so much, and many people have more wealth and security and leisure than ever before, but they still wonder why it all feels so empty and meaningless. But God is not present just to impress us with His power and indescribability. When God reveals Himself to Isaiah, who thinks he doesn't stand a chance because of his own sin and the sin of his people, God does not simply blow him away in a blast of glory. No, God gives him a mission,

a message to be preached, a new identity as God’s prophet that must be carried boldly out into the world. And likewise, Paul says that “if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.” We have a new identity and a new mission as heirs with Christ, carrying out the work of God’s kingdom, looking forward to the glory yet to be revealed.

Today we celebrate the fact that our God has come near enough to us to invite us to know Him, even though fully knowing Him is far beyond our current abilities. And as He comes near, we can set aside our selfishness, and set aside our superstition, and take up the mission He gives us.



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