

**Sunday, July 21, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Holiness of God”**

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The sixth chapter of Isaiah is perhaps one of the most familiar – in that it includes the call of the prophet: *Whom shall I send* asks God. *Send me* says Isaiah.

This passage is often used to speak about God’s will for us and what we might do to live into our own sense of call.

This passage, however, is filled with so much more.

Chapter 6 includes a vision and a message.

The vision is one of the glory of God.

It is a scene of glorious majesty – a vision of God’s holiness.

A vision of a God whose presence and power fill the entire temple – an apt metaphor describing the way that God is present in all his majesty at the center of people’s life.

The vision includes holy attendants, the Seraphim, (who are not to be confused with cherubim who oversee the seat of Mercy).

The Seraphim are six-winged creatures standing about the king’s throne.

Two wings covered their eyes to shield them from God’s brilliance;

Two covered their feet, indicating that they were rooted to the spot – obedient servants who would only move at God’s command;

And two wings to fly in order to carry out the will and orders of the Lord.

Together they are engaged in the task of chanting God’s praises.

*Holy, Holy, Holy* – signifies the entirety of the divine perfection;

that which separates God from His creation.

Here we get a glimpse into the heart of Isaiah’s theology.

God is the Creator who exists in absolute independence of the creature.

God is the Lord, and not a man. The scene is described but not the Lord.

Although the creation depends upon God, God Himself is entirely independent of creation.

In their song of praise the seraphim set forth what was the distinguishing characteristic of God: His holiness.

Their hearts burst forth in praise of God's very essence.

We too, are called to praise God's holy name-to let our hearts burst with love.

Author, Edward Young reminds us:

“To praise God's name involves more than the mere repetition of *Holy, Holy, Holy*. It includes deep meditation upon God and His attributes and the living of a life of humility in accordance with the precepts laid down in His Word. It is, in other words, the life of faith in Jesus Christ, lived for the glory of God.”

The Book of Revelation shared the same vision of six-winged creatures attending to the Lord, singing

*Holy, Holy, Holy; The Lord God Almighty*

Isaiah's vision, however, goes beyond holiness: God is both king and judge, ready to exercise His kingly prerogative of pronouncing judgment upon the people of Judah.

Let's set the scene:

King Uzziah died in 742 BCE.

He had been a great king who reigned forty one years in Judah.

He had repaired the defenses of Jerusalem, and reorganized and refitted the army;

He had imposed his rule over Edomite lands and secured the north-south trade routes;

He had thrust his frontier deep into Philistine territory and into the southern desert;

He had supported farmers and vinedressers in the hills and in the fertile lands, “for he loved the soil.”

He had dug cisterns in the arid wilderness, and invented new siege defenses for Jerusalem.

This great king had accomplished much – but he succumbed to the sin of pride and was punished by the Lord with leprosy from which he died.

And now, in a vision, Isaiah is confronted with the real King.

The year in which Isaiah saw the Lord is the year in which the old order ended.

The great glory and national pride of Judah were now facing an end, never to rise again.

According to tradition the year of Uzziah's death coincided with the rise of the great city on the Tiber.

From this point on Judah declined more and more and the power of Rome increased.

Isaiah is called to the awful mission of declaring the downfall of his nation.

He is to "Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes."

Because of sinfulness, the entire nation is unfit to praise God.

Praise is a privilege, not granted to all, but only to those whose guilt has been removed.

Isaiah's preaching is intended to make the people even more stubborn and rebellious, so that God's judgment will be even more deserved.

The nation had so sinned and hardened its heart that it contained within it the seeds of its own destruction.

The judgment will be carried out in that the people will be brought into exile.

The Lord, who chose Israel and gave her the land of promise, will now remove her from that land.

Isaiah understands this and cries out "How Long, O Lord?"

Isaiah scholar J. Alec Motyer characterizes the situation this way:

"The judgment will be as awful as he had already foreseen-the promises are, however, equally real, resting upon a divine work of salvation and enjoyed by a company of individual believers of whom Isaiah, in his personal experience, is the exemplar."

In his vision, Isaiah has experienced the redemption that is to come. His first response to being in God's presence was a confession: "Woe is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

But the seraphs – at God's command – fly to Isaiah and offer absolution.

The stone, taken from the altar, was merely a symbol of forgiveness; the fire in itself could not cleanse the sin.

The cleansing and purifying work is not that of fire, but of God alone. God alone is the author of forgiveness.

Touching of the lips with the live coal shows how God ministers to the sinner, to us, at the point of confessed need.

The effect is instantaneous.

One commentator paraphrased the scene:

“The ‘burning one’ approached with fire but when the fire touched the voice said, ‘Forgiven.

So it will be with Judah and her people.

The tree is felled but the voice says, ‘the holy seed.’

Hope is the unexpected fringe attached to the garment of doom.”

Hope is the unexpected fringe attached to the garment of doom—I love that line.

Despite the tragedy of the desolation, there will come forth a new Judah from the holy seed.

In the “and yet” we may see a “there shall be.”

There shall still be a surviving remnant, and however frequently that very remnant may appear to perish, there shall still be a remnant of the remnant left, and this indestructible bit shall be the holy seed, the true church.

One of the major motifs in the Book of Isaiah is that God has a plan—a design he is working out in history.

Part of that plan is the destruction of Judah’s pride, so that Isaiah’s preaching, which makes the people even more rebellious, is simply and instrument of that plan.

The final part of God’s plan, then, is that he be acknowledged as Lord in all the earth, that the whole earth be full of his glory, of esteem and honor for him.

But trust is the condition—trust in the power and working of this promising God. And so, says the Lord through his prophet “If you will not believe, you shall not be established.”

Message is the same as in Isaiah’s time—that if we will trust that sign and the power and the purity, the plan and the mercy of the God who sent him, then our lives will be saved, not only now, but for all eternity.

As one scholar wrote: If we do believe—if we trust the Holy One of Israel—then surely, yes, surely indeed, we shall be established.

I believe that today’s passage speaks to us in our time.

We are living in a time when a sense of entitlement has taken over a sense of humility.

Fear has become a primary motivator for our actions – rather than hope.

Our trust has shifted away from God and onto material wealth and institutions.

We give little thought to eternity, wanting everything in the here and now.

As active Christians, we often feel like a small remnant in society.

Isaiah's mission was to bring his people to their lowest point so that God's redemption could take place.

I would like to think that we are capable of repentance and reconciliation without having to suffer devastation.

In Jesus Christ, hope was delivered.

We are a resurrection people.

In Jesus Christ our sins were forgiven.

We are ready to be established as a part of God's kingdom.

All we have to do is participate.

We must trust in God's power.

We must be willing to praise God's holiness while confessing our own humanness.

We need God.

This past week there has been a tremendous amount of discussion around the Trayvon Martin case.

Regardless of where you stand or what you think about the outcome – the one sure thing is that, in the end, God will be the judge.

God is the one to whom we are each accountable.

Your actions, your thoughts, your intentions; are ultimately only known by you and God.

To think otherwise is a folly.

So, let our hearts and our eyes and our ears and our souls be open to the majesty of God.

Let's look at a few of the questions raised by today's readings:

1. Do you think that God has a plan?
2. In what ways do we harbor the seeds of our own destruction?
3. What does the church fear most?