

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Dear Friends in Christ,

GOD: "WHOM SHALL I SEND?"

There's a man who likes to tell the story of how before he got down to the serious stuff of life, he was able to take a brief tour Egypt with a friend. (This was decades ago, much safer.) In the course of their week in Egypt they made sure to visit the greatest man-made wonder of the world, the Great Pyramids. They took the obligatory camel ride. When the guides had gotten them round the backside of the last of the three great pyramids, they told the friends to get off the camels and suggested they could climb the pyramid. Cool! Up the young men climbed, into the Egyptian summer sun, scaling dozens of courses of three foot stone blocks. Two courses from the top, the guide said, "You must stop here." "Why? We are so close!" "Because, the guards, if they see you, they might shoot you." Well, they didn't get to stand on the tippy-top, but they did get to survey the great pyramids and the Sphinx and other wonders of ancient Egypt from a vantage point that few tourists enjoy.

What's the most amazing place you have ever stood? A battlefield, imaging the tens of thousands surging across the field? A mountaintop where you wanted to stand for a day to soak in the glory of creation? A delivery room? Standing in that place you felt something that moved you and you still love to share.

What a sight! An even more magnificent sight, seen by even fewer human eyes. Pyramids—nothing! Isaiah found himself in the throne room of God. The first verse gives the location as the temple. It was probably not the Jerusalem temple, though one can't say for sure. One little clue in that direction is that Isaiah saw God seated on a throne, and there was no throne in the temple in Jerusalem. Whatever Isaiah was seeing, he was standing in a special measure of God's presence. (A curious little detail is that while Isaiah describes the angels, and the temple and the throne, and God's robe, he never describes God himself.

And I think that is telling us something too.)

I. WHY IT CAN'T BE ME

Just in case Isaiah didn't get how special this was, the seraphs, angelic beings of some sort whose name means "fiery ones", these seraphs declared, "***Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.***" When they said it, they weren't gently strumming harp strings. "***At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.***" Heaven itself was rattled. Instead of melodic harps, imagine the thunder of a lightning bolt a little too close for comfort, the freight train before the tornado hits, the rumble of a volcano where the earth threatens to tear itself apart.

God is that holy. God is that pure. He is separate. There is a wall of separation—or is it a canyon—between him and the rest of creation. Even the angels, sinless though they be, cover their faces and feet in God's presence. People who like the thought of being chummy with God just don't get God's holiness. And God's holiness is not like a glass of water. Put one drop of ink in it, and it is all polluted. God's holiness cannot be tainted. His holiness is more like an antibiotic. It seeks out the infection and destroys it. So what can sinful Isaiah do other than wail, "***Woe to me!... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.***"

Both Isaiah and God have a problem. God's "problem" is that he has a message to get out, but the material he has to work with, well it leaves something to be desired. He's a businessman with no qualified candidates for the jobs.

In our Gospel reading, same thing. The Good News of Jesus Christ would explode out into the world in a couple short years. Jesus just needed to train a few willing messengers. But whom can Jesus find except a few fishermen who see one little catch of fish they can't explain, about one one-millionth the glory that Isaiah saw, and they fall to pieces. We have the ridiculous picture of this fisherman in a smallish boat in a big lake, on his knees, begging Jesus, "***Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.***" Really Simon? You're in a boat! You want Jesus to go away? Where? But at least Simon, like Isaiah, had the good sense to realize that by all rights he should not be in the presence of Jesus, even for a moment.

And so Isaiah's problem becomes obvious. Before we go further, we do well to think about what the LORD Almighty did *not* say to Isaiah (nor did Jesus to Simon Peter, for that matter.) God did not say, "Oops, sorry, human! Didn't mean to scare you." God did not tell Isaiah that his concerns were exaggerated. God did not tell Isaiah, "Oh, don't worry about it." Instead, the LORD as much as says, "You *should* be afraid, Isaiah. But I will take care of your sin problem." And God took Isaiah's sin problem in hand and dealt with it. "***Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar...***" You know, from the altar, where sacrifice for sin is made. "***With it [the seraph] touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'***" How scary is that? A fiery angel flies at you holding a glowing burning coal, and he touches you mouth with it? You expect pain. What you feel is cleansing from sin.

This is the great treasure that God's people have. While all the rest of the world is trying to pretend, to keep up appearances, to dodge responsibility, we run *to* God with our sins, not hide *from* God. (Which was the original problem, wasn't it.) We freely admit. Almost every worship service begins with a confession, because our forefathers and those before them realized that the answer to our human sin is never running away from God. Our natural failings are dealt with, not by hiding the truth nor by pretending that all is well. And as long as we run or hide or pretend, we choose destruction. We put our trust in our sinful, flawed, pretentious selves who can make nothing right. We must stand before God, owning our sins like a pile of dirty laundry in front of us rather than trying to hide them behind our backs; like the prophet saying, "Woe to me! I am ruined! I am sinful." Then and there forgiveness becomes ours.

This was not Isaiah's only experience with God's grace. Remember that, Christians. God's grace is not something you get a shot of once in your life, to take care of your past, and from then on you are good. We live every day in grace. Years later Isaiah would again lament, "*All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*" He would thirst for the forgiveness only God can give: "*We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*" He had to frequently come to God confessing, and yet time and again without fail God assured him of grace and forgiveness, "*Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow,*" and elsewhere, "*I am he who blots out your transgressions, and remembers your sins no more.*" Best known of all is the prophecy of the 53rd chapter, that precious Scripture we read out every Good Friday as our Savior's life bleeds away for us, "*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*"

What Isaiah experienced in this throne room of God—God's holiness putting fear into his heart and the seraph communicating God's solution—that is a mirror image of our lives. We need his mercy. We depend on God's mercy. We are confident of that mercy. We are not children of a cruel parent, worrying what comes next. We are children of a loving God. We have even more reason for confidence than this prophet. We have more reason for confidence because what Old Testament believers knew only in prophecy, we have recorded for us in history. They had a shadowy, future Deliverer, but we have Jesus, the Lamb of God, who came in flesh and blood, who took away the sin of the world.

GOD: "WHOM SHALL I SEND?" – II. HOW IT CAN BE ME

Forgiven, Isaiah finally gets to the reason he was standing before the LORD. Strange, isn't it, how wrapped up we get in the drama of Isaiah's fear and God's solution, that we have forgotten the obvious question: "Why! Why has God summoned this man into a heaven?"

Now we find out: "*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'*"

It is not the way we would have chosen to do it. I mean the first part of God's plan we sort of understand: sending Jesus to earth to be our Savior. It makes sense; we could never save ourselves. And when Jesus was on earth, he revealed himself through his words, through his deeds. So far so good. But the rest of God's plan... has problems. God has

decided that the good news of Jesus will be passed from generation to generation, through people. These are people like Isaiah who confessed, ***“I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips.”*** People like Simon Peter kneeling before Jesus in a boat saying, “Just go away. Please, just go away!” Why entrust the message to sinful humans with our hang-ups and our histories? Why not angels? I don’t have the answer, but it is God’s choice, and it is the only way.

In the unavoidable logic of Romans 10, the apostle Paul puts God’s way of doing things all out on the table for us: *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?”* (14-15)

Someone needs to talk about Jesus, so that people can hear about Jesus, so that they can believe in Jesus, so that they can be saved. So here is God’s question, ***“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”***

At the summons, Isaiah rushes down to the recruitment office and signs on the dotted line, ***“Here am I. Send me!”*** That’s the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness changes people. This man, who had seconds before feared for his life, now pledges his life to God. Forgiveness leads people to dedicate themselves to God.

Some, like Isaiah, dedicate themselves to the full time, direct spiritual work of God’s kingdom. For those who are gifted and called to do so, let them not shy away from that full time summons.

Yet the call is not just for full time workers like Isaiah and Simon Peter. If you are in a pew, don’t think this has nothing to say to you. Think about who it was who brought you to know your Savior. Who, humanly speaking, had the most influence in bringing you into a relationship with Jesus? Surveys pretty consistently say only about 5% of Christians would point to a pastor. For most, the most important people are parents and friends. When God asks, ***“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”*** we realize that our individual callings, in their wide variety, are each God’s call to be the yeast, the salt, that works into and flavors the world with the Gospel.

We are called to reveal Jesus. Forgiven, we know all we need to know. Amen.