

Sermon for February 9, 2025 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-8 EHV

Theme: **Holy, Holy, Holy.**

- 1) Come before the LORD a sinner
- 2) Leave with Him a saint

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each one had six wings. With two they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet. With two they flew. ³ One called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies! The whole earth is full of his glory! ⁴ The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of the one who called, and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ Then I said, “I am doomed! I am ruined, because I am a man with unclean lips, and I dwell among a people with unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies!” ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, carrying a glowing coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth with the coal and said, “Look, this has touched your lips, so your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.” ⁸ Then I heard the Lord’s voice, saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am. Send me!”

With what kind of attitude does God want you to approach Him? King David answered that question by writing:

For you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices God wants are a broken spirit. A broken and crushed heart, O God, you will not despise.ⁱ

God does not take pleasure in people telling Him how good and deserving they are of His blessings. Instead, He wants us to confess our unworthiness and absolute need for His forgiveness and grace.

Today, we will consider how God wants us to enter His presence, under the theme “**Holy, Holy, Holy.**” 1) Come before Him as a sinner. 2) Leave with Him as a saint.

Part One: Come before Him a sinner

The “Service of the Word” liturgy in our old hymnal began with these words: “We have come into the presence of God, who created us to love and serve Him as His dear children.”

What does it mean to come into God’s presence? Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is with them.ⁱⁱ Since we gathered in Jesus’ name, we are in His presence.

How do you envision Jesus’ presence? Do you imagine Him seated in a pew or standing behind me, guiding my words as I speak to you?

Listen to what Isaiah saw when He was taken into God's presence.

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

What a sight that must have been! The LORD is so big that King Solomon once confessed: “*In truth, the heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this house, which I have built!*”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, when we come into God's presence, we are like ants approaching Mount Everest.

Isaiah continues his description.

² Above him stood the seraphim. Each one had six wings. With two they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet. With two they flew.

The seraphim are holy angels—mighty spiritual beings without a single trace of sin. If we could imagine any creature capable of looking God in the face, these angels would be them. However, they cover their faces before the Lord's holiness and conceal their feet. Why their feet? In the Bible, a person's “walk” symbolizes their deeds and endeavours. Even though the angels' every action are perfect and holy, they don't dream of approaching the LORD with a “look at what we have done” attitude.

Instead:

³ One called to another and said, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies! The whole earth is full of his glory!”

The angels confess God as holy, which means “set apart” from anything else that exists. They confess him to be three times holy, acknowledging that the LORD is three persons and yet one being. Most importantly, they do not confess their own holiness or good deeds before God, but only praise God for His work for us! If, therefore, the holiest of angels do not think of approaching God, saying, “Look at what I have done for you!” why do we, sinful humans, feel entitled to such arrogance? And yet, isn't that what we're tempted to do? “Look, LORD, I'm a decent person. Don't I deserve your blessings?” That is not the way to approach God. Instead, learn from the angels and approach the LORD in humility, praising Him for His glorious works.

As each angel proclaimed God's glory to the others,

⁴ The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of the one who called, and the temple was filled with smoke.

The scene reminds me of Mt. Sinai: when the LORD revealed His presence to the Israelites, causing them to tremble in fear.^{iv} Why did they react that way? Because God is so holy, powerful, and mighty, while we humans are weak and sinful, deserving of His wrath and punishment. Is it any wonder why Isaiah was also terrified?

⁵ Then I said, “I am doomed! I am ruined, because I am a man with unclean lips, and I dwell among a people with unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies!”

Elsewhere in Scripture, King Solomon repeatedly emphasized that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*^v The “fear” Solomon refers to is a profound respect for who God is and everything He does. It involves a genuine recognition of God’s holiness and our sinfulness. That’s precisely what Isaiah experienced and confessed. Before the LORD, he was nothing; even his righteous actions were like a filthy rag.^{vi} Therefore, Isaiah acknowledged not only his unworthiness and sin, but also that of the entire nation because no one is righteous before God.^{vii}

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus promised to be with all who gather in His name.^{viii} Now, we might be tempted to think: “Isaiah must have seen God the Father because Jesus would not have been so frightening.” No, Isaiah saw Jesus. How do I know? After quoting what God says right after our sermon text, the Apostle John wrote: “*Isaiah said these things when he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.*”^{ix} Think about that for a moment: Isaiah’s vision of God was a vision of Jesus in all His splendour!

We have gathered in Jesus’ name to worship the LORD. What do you see around you this morning? Probably a group of kind people in a charming little church. But is that all there is? No, our eyes of faith comprehend that we have entered the presence of God and stand in the same temple Isaiah envisioned. We have come before the same glorious Jesus, who is present with His angels. The LORD mercifully conceals this great and terrifying sight from our physical eyes because He knows we could not bear it. Nevertheless, what Isaiah described in his vision is our spiritual reality!

What does this truth motivate you to do? Hopefully, to confess your sinfulness and desperate need for mercy, just like Isaiah did! Don’t think about approaching the LORD in self-righteous pride, imagining you deserve His blessings. If the sinless, holy angels don’t do that, what makes us think we should? Instead, God wants you to recognize your sins and acknowledge your absolute need for His mercy. Why? Because unless you genuinely repent of your sins, you will never receive His gracious forgiveness in faith!

Therefore, let us recognize that we have come into the presence of God, who created us to love and serve him as his dear children. But we have disobeyed him and deserve only his wrath and punishment. Therefore, let us confess our sins to him and plead for his mercy by praying: “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner!”

Part Two: Leave with Him a saint

And mercy is precisely what the LORD desires to show us, as demonstrated by what happened next to Isaiah.

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, carrying a glowing coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth with the coal and said, “Look, this has touched your lips, so your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.”

The angel’s action seems strange until you understand what it symbolizes. The altar served as the site for sacrifices made to atone for sins. These sacrifices foreshadowed the once-and-for-all sacrifice Jesus would make on the cross for the sins of all humanity. By using a coal from the altar, the angel effectively conveyed to Isaiah that God had forgiven all his sins and purified him from all unrighteousness. Why? Because of the promised sacrifice Jesus would make. By touching his lips with the burning coal, the angel proclaimed that the LORD had purified Isaiah’s speech, enabling him to serve as the LORD’s spokesperson.

God’s Word promises that *if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*^x That is precisely what the LORD does every time we confess our sins to Him in worship. He sends his messengers, pastors, to console our fearful hearts with the Gospel of Christ. In the sacrament of Holy Communion, they touch our lips with the very body and blood Jesus offered up on the altar of His cross and say: “See, this very Jesus, whom you are now receiving, offered himself up as the once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice for your sins. Be of good cheer: The LORD has forgiven you! You are at peace with God!”

What a blessing! This same almighty Jesus, whose majestic presence we stand before, once stood in our stead. He, the God from whom angels conceal their faces, endured jeering, mockery, beating and crucifixion to save us all. What love He has for us that He should forgive us, and forgiven we are! Jesus’ empty tomb proves it.

Our text continues:

⁸ Then I heard the Lord’s voice, saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am. Send me!”

After receiving the Lord’s forgiveness, Isaiah was so happy that when the LORD asked if anyone wanted to help him, Isaiah responded as enthusiastically as a little child wanting to do something with his parents, *“Here I am. Send me!”* But why did Isaiah volunteer? Was he confident in his abilities? No, instead, the Lord’s merciful love compelled him to serve.

As Isaiah contemplated the Lord’s gracious forgiveness of all his sins and allowed him to be in His presence, he felt overwhelming gratitude. He no longer feared God’s righteous anger over sin. Instead, Isaiah lived in the peace of God’s forgiveness, a peace so extraordinary that Isaiah yearned to thank the LORD in any way he could. The LORD granted Isaiah this opportunity by inviting him to serve as His spokesman before Judah and Israel.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, He has taken away all the guilt of your sins. Through faith in Him, you stand before the LORD as His forgiven and adopted child. Just as the LORD asked Isaiah, He now asks you: “Whom shall I send to the communities of Barrhaven, Kanata, Kemptville, Canton, and Cornwall? Who will tell the people in Southern Ontario and Upstate New York the good news about how I paid for their sins?”

What is your response? Are you silent, praying in your heart: “Please Lord, don’t pick me - send someone else?” Or, filled with joy because of the relationship you have with Christ, do you pray: “Here am I, Lord. Send me to my family and friends who do not know you. Send me to the people still burdened with the guilt of sin. Use me as your instrument to proclaim your Gospel to my community.”

Let us be honest: We often do not feel as enthusiastic as Isaiah, do we? Why? One excuse we use is that we don’t feel qualified. We convince ourselves that the pastor would be better suited to share the Gospel with others, or at least another Christian who is better versed in Scripture. Was Isaiah qualified to speak God’s Word to others? By his own admission, he was a man with unclean lips who lived among a people with unclean lips! But the LORD touched his lips with His forgiving grace – choosing him to be His witness to the people He put in Isaiah’s life.

And the LORD has done the same for you! Think about how merciful the LORD has been to you – forgiving all your sins and making you an heir of heaven. Who cares if you feel unqualified to share the Gospel? The LORD Himself has saved and chosen you to be a witness to your family, friends, and neighbours. Doesn’t His love compel you to want to share the good news of Christ with them?^{xi}

Here’s the cool part: we don’t only stand in God’s presence when we come to worship. No, Jesus promises to remain present with us throughout our lives – loving, guiding, protecting and helping us, as He stated before His ascension: “*And surely I am with you always until the end of the age.*”^{xii} Yes, the same almighty LORD that Isaiah stood before in His vision stands with us every day of our lives. Therefore, we do not have to be afraid of what we should say or how it will be received. Speak the truth of God’s Word in love, and the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God almighty. Come before Him as a sinner. Leave with Him as a dearly loved saint – zealous to share His Word with those God puts in your life to the glory of His saving name. Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 51:16-17 EHV

ⁱⁱ Cf. Matthew 18:20

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Kings 8:27 EHV

^{iv} Cf. Exodus 18:19-20

^v Proverbs 9:10 EHV

^{vi} Cf. Isaiah 64:6

^{vii} Cf. Romans 3:10ff

^{viii} Cf. Matthew 18:20

^{ix} John 12:41 EHV

^x 1 John 1:9 EHV

^{xi} Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

^{xii} Matthew 28:20 EHV