

Sermon: Holy

Text: Isaiah 6

Introduction:

Many Bible scholars down through the years have wondered why Isaiah's call to be a prophet isn't recorded until we come to Isaiah chapter 6. Nobody knows for certain—but by placing it where he does, we can fully appreciate why Isaiah says that he lives “among a people of unclean lips” (verse 5), since chapters 1-5 give us a detailed and stinging description of the people of Judah and their leaders. These first five chapters may also help the reader appreciate why Isaiah also confesses that he himself is “a man of unclean lips” (verse 5) — that is, if nothing else, he would have incurred guilt by association!

Here in chapter 6 we come to the overwhelming experience described in verses 1-4. Isaiah says that he “saw the Lord” (verse 1). In some traditions, to see God is to die (see Exodus 33:20, although compare Psalms 24:6; 27:8-9), so it is no wonder that Isaiah is struck by his inadequacy and unworthiness in the presence of a God whose holiness has been emphasized by the repetition of “Holy” in the song of the seraphs (verse 3). To be holy is to be totally other, and especially to stand apart from all that is sinful and unclean. To repeat it three times is to emphasize it to the greatest magnitude.

Isaiah's experience apparently takes place in “the temple” (verse 1), the innermost portion of which was known as the “Holy of Holies.” It housed the ark, which was viewed as God's earthly throne. In Isaiah's visionary experience, the carved creatures that decorated the ark (angels) come to life, and gradually the distinction between the earthly temple and God's heavenly dwelling place becomes blurred. Isaiah is aware of standing in the very presence of God and God's heavenly council (see the “us” in verse 6; and see 1 Kings 22:19 where the prophet Micah also “saw the LORD sitting on his throne,” surrounded by heavenly attendants). Isaiah knows he has truly been confronted by “the King, the LORD of hosts” (verse 5).

Even though encountering and being encountered by the Holy God appropriately humble him, Isaiah has nothing to fear. God is not out to kill him, but rather to forgive him. Since this a direct experience of God, no sacrifice need be brought or offered. The fire of the altar, conveyed by the seraphs, is cleansing enough. Isaiah is forgiven (verses 6-7).

Interestingly, Isaiah's call comes not in the form of a divine command, but rather in the form of a question. And the question is not even addressed to Isaiah. Rather, God speaks to the heavenly council, and Isaiah overhears the conversation. Nonetheless, as if overwhelmed with gratitude at having been forgiven and permitted to live, Isaiah cannot help but reply: “Here am I; send me!”

It's worth noting that the immediacy and enthusiasm of Isaiah's positive response represents a marked contrast with several other call narratives, including Jeremiah's, whose hesitancy recalls Moses' call (see Jeremiah 1:4-10). For Isaiah, there is no hesitation and there are no excuses, contingencies, or “what-ifs.”

Examination:

- Read **Isaiah 6:1-7**
 - As you read over these 7 verses—what do you think Isaiah was thinking a feeling at this time?
 - In verse 1, what do you think is the significance of God's robe filling the temple? (Hint: Think of other people whose garments had long trains, such as Princess Diana's wedding dress). What could a long train represent?
 - Verse 2 refers to angelic beings that are named nowhere else in Scripture, though they resemble the "living creatures" of Revelation 4:6-9. Why do you think the seraphim (fiery ones) cover their faces and feet?
 - What do you think caused these angels to be in flames?
 - Did Isaiah ever describe God's physical appearance? Do you think that's significant?
 - The angels cried out: "Holy, holy, holy." What does the word holy mean? What does it look like to be personally holy? Why repeated three times?
 - Go back and re-read verses 1-4. Make a list of all of the things that these verses tell us about God. Do these verses change your view of God in any way—and if so, how?
 - In verse 5, what was Isaiah's reaction to the scene? What were the two areas that Isaiah mentioned that felt especially sinful? What are some other areas of a person's life that might cause them to experience the sharp sting of guilt or shame?
 - Why do you think Isaiah felt especially burdened by his mouth and words? (see James 3:6-12)
 - In verse 6—do you think that the method of God's forgiveness was painful? Why do you think God chose this method to pardon Isaiah's sins?

- Read **Isaiah 6:8-13**
 - Why do you think Isaiah was so willing to say "yes" to God's call—and why do you think he did so without hesitation?
 - What do you make of the reference to "us" in verse 8?
 - Verses 9-10 are often overlooked or bypassed because they surface a difficult truth about God. He will give rebellious, arrogant, indifferent sinners over to the hardness of their own hearts and harden them in such a way that they receive the bitter fruit of judgment. How does Romans 1:18-21 and Ephesians 4:18 help you understand the idea of a hardened heart?
 - What do you think it means that "the holy seed will be the stump in the land" in verse 13? Who or what do you think this is talking about?

Application:

Isaiah knew what it was like to feel fragile because of his sin. What voices (sins) are competing with God's voice in your life right now? In the same way that God took holy fire and touched Isaiah's lips to cleanse him—what has God done to cleanse and forgive your sins? Take a moment right now to acknowledge God's holiness, confess your sin before Him, and receive the forgiveness that God in His grace is offering you.