

Sermon: The Awesome God  
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Isaiah 6:1-8

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

2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

5 And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

8 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!”

## THE YEAR THAT KING UZZIAH DIED

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision of God “high and lifted up.”

I know. You got up worrying about this.

Inquiring minds want to know.

Who was King Uzziah and why was his death important?

You're in luck.

Today I'm going to answer that question for you.

King Uzziah was an effective ruler. In fact he ruled Judah for fifty two years and brought military and political stability to the southern kingdom.

He was able to revive the economy and bring his country success on the battlefield. There was an air of confidence and hope in Judah.

If Uzziah was around today we would probably elect him president!

But, sometimes success breeds complacency, and this seems to have been the case with Uzziah and his nation. Corruption and injustice had gone unchallenged for a long time.

Toward the end of his reign Uzziah decided he didn't need a priest to make his sacrifice in the Temple. He was the king. He would make his own sacrifice.

The Bible tells us that the king contracted leprosy as punishment for his prideful actions and was forced to live in isolation for the rest of his days.

And when Uzziah finally died it marked the end of an era. After Uzziah died things would never be the same. Judah would never be this powerful and independent ever again.

Think about the great events of history that have changed the life of our nation: Pearl Harbor, the assassination of a President, or the attack on the World Trade Center.

These events changed the course of history.  
These events forced us to rethink everything.

That's what it was like when King Uzziah died.

Trouble brewed on the horizon like a great desert storm. The Assyrians with their great military might were on a rampage. Judah would soon be pressured by Syria and Israel to join an ill advised battle against the mighty Assyrians.

In this time of great uncertainty no doubt the people longed for another strong king to replace Uzziah.

## THE PROBLEM WITH KINGS

But, God knew that this was not what the people really needed. They needed a renewed understanding of who they were as the people and what they were called to do.

They needed a vision of the holy God who had saved them from slavery and had called them to be His chosen people.

When God led his people out of slavery in the land of Egypt they were unique among the peoples of the ancient world.

Their nation was not based primarily upon economic and military strength. Their nation was based upon trust in God's word and God's care.

They needed no king because God was their king. They trusted in God alone for salvation as they wandered in the wilderness.

But, as God's people became settled in the Promised Land their trust in God began to waiver.

They began to long for a king, an earthly king. They wanted to be like all the other nations. They wanted to protect themselves by having a strong leader who could deliver them in a time of crisis.

Despite warnings from the prophets, the people got their wish.

They got a king. But, by and large the kings did not deliver security. Quite the opposite in fact.

These monarchs often did love God or God's people. Their pride and greed led to many military misadventures and economic injustice.

It also led to theological error as well.

Instead of the radically free and mysterious God who commanded their every movement they now had a “God” who was “on call” for the king. They added the cultural “gods” of the peoples who surrounded them, worshipping on the high places and using graven images.

Divine justice was replaced with royal privilege, and God’s prophets were replaced with the kings “yes men.”

## THE AWESOME GOD

But, the death of King Uzziah forced God’s people to rethink all that.

And maybe that’s why the prophet Isaiah went to the Temple that day. He was seeking comfort and guidance in a time of national crisis.

What he got was a vision of God.

This God was the Creator of heaven and earth.

This God was holy, above and beyond anything the prophet or his people could imagine.

The Bible tells us that the hem of God’s robe filled the Temple. That’s a poetic way of saying that God was way too big for their little Temple.

God is always too big for our little temples.

This vision of a large and mysterious God is amplified by the appearance of these six winged creatures, the seraphim. These creatures have one job, to proclaim the glory of God.

But, even these divine creatures are overwhelmed by the awesome power of God.

That’s why they have two extra sets of wings.

They use them to hide their eyes and their bodies from the holiness of God’s presence.

The word awesome has been overused in recent years.

We might say something like “that band is truly awesome.”

That's not the kind of "awesome" that we're talking about today.

We're using the word "awesome" to describe something that is inspiring and at the same time something that is a source of apprehension.

## PRACTICING THE PRESENCE

It's the type of awesome the Scripture talks about when it says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It's that kind of awesome.

This statement is found in Proverbs and in a Psalm. But, the verse that comes from the Psalm really intrigues me.

The full text of that verse reads, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding." (Psalm 111:10)

We need to "practice" the "fear of the Lord."

In other words worship should consist of using our imagination to cultivate this sense of a God who is above and beyond us. Worship is a way to see the God who is high and lifted up.

The point of worship is to *practice* the awesome presence of God. And it is this experience of worship that enables us to have a sense of perspective in life. We have a good understanding of what is really important.

Most commentators point out that all of the elements of Isaiah's vision were already in the Temple. The Temple curtains were like his description of the hem of God's robe. There may have been representations in the Temple of the griffin-like seraphim mentioned in the vision.

The Temple was normally filled with smoke from the incense being used. There was an altar where sacrifices were made.

And yet these typical sights in the Temple were amplified by a sense of God's real presence.

Isaiah was given special insight by his vision.

And I wonder if Isaiah wasn't prepared to see this vision by a sincere desire to worship, to (as the Psalmist put it) practice the fear of the Lord.

We too must practice the fear of the Lord.

In other words, we have a responsibility when it comes to worship. We cannot just come to the sanctuary on Sunday morning listen to a sermon and half-heartedly sing a few hymns and then go home.

We must use the call to worship, the confession of sin, the hymns, the reading of the Word, and the sermon as a way to catch the Spirit of God's presence.

We are practicing the presence of God.

We are trying to get a sense of how the high and lofty God is a part of the crises in our own life.

## HYMNS

Isaiah looked beyond the representations of God's presence in the Temple to see a deeper, more powerful reality. It is a reality expressed in a hymn that we used as a choral call to worship in a church I served in Virginia. Before every worship service we sang,

The Lord is in his holy temple,  
the Lord is in his holy temple;  
let all the earth keep silence,  
let all the earth keep silence before him,  
keep silence, keep silence before him.

Like many good hymns this one comes from Scripture. (Habakkuk 2:20) And singing that hymn as a call to worship at every service in my tenure at that church reminded me of what was really important. We were there to be silent and practice the presence of the Lord.

During Advent we often sing a hymn entitled, Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.

That hymn also really gets at this sense of awesome power.

In a minor key we sing,  
 “Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand.”

And the last line refers to Isaiah’s vision in the Temple,

“At his feet the six winged seraph;  
 Cherubim with sleepless eye,  
 Veil their faces to his presence,  
 as with ceaseless voice they cry  
 ... Alleluia, Lord Most High.”

Certainly that hymn also gives us a musical glimpse of this awesome God.

Indeed, many traditional worship hymns and praise and worship hymns are designed to point us toward this sense of the awesome presence of God.

## CREATION

The Bible tells us that another way to get at this sense of an awesome God is to look into the heavens. The seraphim said, “The whole earth is full of his glory.”

If we are aware of the awe inspiring nature of creation, we become more aware of the God who made it.

To put it another way, the creation gives us a sense of the awesome Creator.

I’ve mentioned this before, but it is still a source of amazement for me. The Hubble Telescope has shown us star nurseries that existed billions of years before the creation of the universe.

Can you imagine such a thing?

The universe is so large that we are literally looking into the primordial past through the lens of this powerful telescope.

This universe gives a sense of how big God is and how small we are.

The words of the Psalmist are even more powerful today than when they were written long ago,

“When I look at your heavens, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:3-4)

## CONFESSION

The size and scope of the universe is amazing and awe inspiring to the Psalmist. But, it is also disturbing as well. In the presence of such power there is an overwhelming sense of unworthiness.

As the Psalmist put it, “Why should God be concerned with us? We are nothing but a speck of dust in the cosmic wind?”

This sense of unworthiness is also reflected in Isaiah’s vision. The seraphim proclaim the holiness of God. An earthquake shakes the foundations of the Temple. The whole place is filled with a mysterious smoke.

And Isaiah is overwhelmed by it all.

When confronted with this awesome God, not only the foundation of the Temple but also the foundation of his life is shaken to the core. And there is a heightened sense of sinfulness.

Isaiah responds to the presence of God by crying,

“Woe is 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.”

The Apostle Paul would later reflect this same sense of unworthiness in his letter to the Romans (3:23), “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Later the prophet Isaiah will say that all our good works are like “filthy rags” in comparison to our sinfulness. (Isaiah 64:6)

## FORGIVENESS

If Isaiah's vision were to stop at this point it would be a vision of despair.

But, God does not leave the prophet to twist in the wind with this overwhelming sense of sinfulness. Instead God sends his messenger, one of the seraphim to snatch a coal from the altar of God's presence.

And as the prophet's lips are touched with this hot coal, the seraph proclaims,

"Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." (Isaiah 6:7)

God is revealed in this vision to be a God of grace who makes provision for the forgiveness of His prophet.

This is symbol of what will happen in the future. Forgiveness will overcome sin and despair because we have a God who is a God of grace and glory.

But, for now the forgiven prophet is given work to do. After Isaiah is forgiven, he hears the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send?"

And this fearful prophet somehow finds the courage to speak up and say, "Here I am. Send me."

It is forgiveness that allows us to move forward in life. We can respond to God's call not because we are righteous, but because we serve a righteous and gracious God.

As the Psalmist put it, God does not "deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities."

Instead, God takes away our sins as far as the East is from the West. (Psalm 103:10-12)

## TRINITY SUNDAY

You may have noticed in your bulletin that today is Trinity Sunday. This is the only Sunday dedicated to a theological doctrine.

The doctrine of the Trinity states that God is revealed in three “persons,” Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To put it another way, this doctrine is way of talking about the fact that the God of heaven is also active here on earth.

In Jesus the God who is high and lifted up comes down to earth. Jesus is that “hot coal” from the heavenly altar. His sacrifice touches our lips and our hearts. In him we are forgiven and freed to proclaim the good news of God’s grace to all people.

The presence of the awesome God reminds us of our sinfulness. But, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world comes to us in Jesus. And the Spirit of God in Christ enables us to move forward even when the way forward is not clear.

In today’s lesson we also see that the same God who is high and lifted up is also the God who sends a word of forgiveness down to earth.

Our second hymn, Holy, Holy, Holy reflects the words of the seraphim, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty.”

But, our view of God in this hymn goes beyond Isaiah’s vision. We see the forgiveness of the prophet as a foreshadowing of the ministry of Jesus.

In this Holy God we see God in three “persons blessed Trinity.” We see mystery and worship. We see sin and forgiveness.

In fact the important points of this sermon are contained in that hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

I’m going to ask Mark to do something different this morning. I’m going to ask him to play an extra long introduction to the hymn, Holy, Holy, Holy so that you can have an opportunity to meditate upon the words of the hymn before we sing it.

I'm going to ask you to practice the presence of a Holy God. Think about it. Apply it to your own situation.

The doctrine of the Trinity, the mystery of God's presence and grace in the world is not a problem to be solved. It is a vision of holiness. It is a source of wonder and awe. It is a reason to worship. It is a call to service.

God is in his holy temple.  
Let us be silent in his presence.  
And then let us give God praise.

Amen.