“Holy Is the Lord,” Isaiah 6:1-13 (Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 2024)

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2**Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he 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**And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. **5**And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

**6**Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. **7**And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

**8**And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” **9**And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “ ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ **10**Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

**11**Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, **12**and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. **13**And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

One of the new buzzwords in the counseling and ministry word over the last several years is “trauma.” You didn’t hear nearly as much about it twenty years ago, but today it’s common to hear a professional or even someone on TikTok speak about “trauma-informed counseling,” or “therapy.” One prominent writer in the field wants all the world to become a “trauma-informed society.”

I think this development has for the most part been a good thing. I have a friend, who is also a pastor, who had a very difficult childhood, and after he read one of the most popular books in the trauma-informed field he told me, “Nothing described the experiences of my life and my response to stress better than that book.” There are, I’m sure, therapists who take this too far, because when everything is trauma then nothing is trauma. But on the whole, I think this change is a helpful addition to anyone’s psychological toolbox.

But the one thing few of us in this room associate with trauma is becoming a Christian. We want our children to become Christians. We want our friends to become Christians. We associate following Jesus with joy, peace, and comfort, not trauma.

But Jesus, in John 3:3, says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Being born is wonderful thing. None of us would be here without the experience of having been born. Yet it’s a traumatic experience, for both the mother and the child. And Jesus chooses birth as his metaphor of choice when describing what it’s like to become a Christian.

Our text for today is the call of Isaiah, perhaps the most famous passage of them all from this book. And for Isaiah, it was a traumatic event. I want to show you three things from it: *first, the trauma of holiness.* *Second, the trauma of forgiveness.* *Third, the trauma of evangelism.*

First, the trauma of holiness. In verses 1-4 we read about the experience Isaiah had when he went up to the temple for worship. He had probably gone to the temple hundreds of times before, but this time something totally unexpected happened. ***He had an encounter with God*.**  As more than one minister has put it, Isaiah went to church and found the last person he expected to meet there: God.

In Isaiah’s vision, he’s probably taken out of the earthly temple and planted in the heavenly throne room, of which the temple in Jerusalem was only a very, very small copy. Isaiah saw that God was seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Now, the significance of that is wasted on us because we aren’t around kings. And except for weddings, a lot of us are never any garments with a long train.

But in the ancient world ***the longer the train of the robe of the regent the more powerful and glorious the monarch was***, and that’s a tradition that’s continued even to this day.

When Prince Charles was crowned King Charles III of England last year he had a long train behind his robe. But because we all knew so much about Charles and the failures of his private life leading up to his coronation, I just couldn’t bring myself to watch his coronation. For me, what was far more awe-inspiring was the 1953 coronation of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II of England. It was the first ever televised broadcast of the coronation of a British monarch. You can watch it on YouTube.

She leaves her palace in a stagecoach made of gold, drawn by eight horses, and when you see her get out at Westminster Abbey you can see how long the train of her robe is. It’s at least twelve feet long, and it also takes six maids to carry it. Then she enters the church, and she sits in King Edwards’s chair, which every monarch since the fourteenth century has used. Then, item by item, they dress her. A gown of pure gold, emphasizing the wealth of her kingdom. Gloves, reflecting how gently the queen is to deal with her people. A sword, symbolizing the military might of her kingdom. A scepter, the symbol of her authority to rule. And finally, they place St. Edward’s crown on her head. The abbey, filled clergy and nobility, cries out, “God save the queen! God save the queen!”  
  
Even as an American, someone who believes in our leaders being elected to office instead of inheriting it, it’s an impressive sight. But it pales in comparison to the vision Isaiah saw in the temple. For it was no mere human monarch he saw that day; it was the Lord God Almighty.

The train of his robe filled the temple. If it filled the room, the train must have snaked around that gigantic space for miles.

Nor was the Lord God extolled by clergy and noblemen, but by seraphim. The word *seraph* literally means “burning ones.” They were mighty six-winged angelic beings. If you saw one, you’d be terrified by it.

We’re not told how many Isaiah saw flying above God’s throne, but in Revelation 5, when the apostle John had a vision of the same throne room, we read that he saw “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angelic beings. A “myriad” means “ten thousand”; if you multiply myriads by myriads you get numbers into the hundreds of millions.

Isaiah sees an overwhelming sight. These seraphim were calling out one another, and their voices were so powerful that the very foundation of the temple quaked at their voice. They were saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Isaiah 6:3.

The word “holy” is notoriously difficult to translate. There is no single English word that gets the idea of the Hebrew word across, and the word itself means different things in different contexts. The best I can do is that in Isaiah 6 someone is “holy” when they are “set apart, are fundamentally different, because of their greatness and glory.”

Whenever we get around someone obviously greater, more talented, or more attractive or powerful than us, it doesn’t make us feel better about ourselves. **It usually makes us feel worse.**

For example, I’m a fairly tall guy. I’m often the tallest guy in a group or in a room. But whenever I get around the Ole Miss basketball team I don’t like it. I am unaccustomed to having to look up physically at other people. It’s unnerving to me. You could say their physical “holiness” is a more than I like.

Getting around someone famous, while it might be exciting, most of the time ***makes you self-conscious***. We call it being “star-struck.” If you know you’re about to meet someone famous, an actor, athlete, musician, even a politician, what do you do right before you meet? You check your breath and fix your hair. You make sure you have nothing stuck in your teeth and you make sure your pants were zipped. And the whole time under your breath you’re saying, “Don’t make a fool of yourself.” You might even be so nervous you shake a little bit. You find you’re breathing more rapidly.

***But how much more so when you meet God?*** When someone encounters God in the Bible, it’s never a casual event. No one simply has a drink with God. When Job meets God in Job 42:6 he says, “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” When John meets the resurrected Jesus in all his divine glory and holiness, we read in Revelation 1:17 that John “fell at his feet as though dead.” *It’s traumatizing to have an encounter with the holy, and no one is holier than God.*

Isaiah meets God and ***he thinks he’s going to die***. He says, “Woe is me! For I am lost [other translations have “I am ruined!” or “I am undone!”]; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King …” Isaiah 6:5.

To be undone means you’re falling apart. Isaiah is shaking so much in God’s presence he’s disintegrating. He even pronounces a curse on himself (that’s what “woe is me” means) as if to say, “How can I possibly survive?”

***Isaiah 6 teaches us that the perfection of God’s holiness is too much for imperfect people like us.*** If we ever come into contact with the full force of God’s holiness, it will destroy us.

And one day the Bible says you will meet this God. There will come a day called Judgment Day when everyone will set eyes on the God whom Isaiah saw in his vision. There will be only one of two possible reactions.

One reaction is the joy of finally seeing this king you’ve longed for and prayed to and tried to serve face-to-face. The second is best described later by John in Revelation 6:15-17: “Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, **16**calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, **17**for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” In other words, they’d rather take their chances with collapsing mountains than have to face God’s holiness.

***Holiness is fundamental to who God is.*** That’s not to say that love isn’t fundamental to who God is. No, God is love. But the only threefold description of God in the Bible is, “Holy, holy, holy.” It’s as if to say ***you’ll never understand the love of God unless you first understand his holiness.***

If you don’t understand God’s holiness, then when someone tells you about the love of God you’ll think, “Well of course God loves me. His job is to love people. Besides, what’s not to love?” That’s how sinners naturally think. But if that’s all God’s love is to you, it’s superficial. And the death of Jesus Christ on the cross certainly won’t make any sense. If God just loves everyone, but he’s not holy, ***why in the world did the best man who ever lived have to die?***

But if God is holy, if he’s determined to destroy sin, the death of Jesus makes sense, ***because how else could God love an imperfect sinner like me unless he first punished my sin in the perfect person of his Son?*** And then you see the ***power and depth behind the notion of God’s love***. Yes, God is love, but you can only experience it after having an encounter with his holiness.

Yet even God’s love can be overwhelming. Second, the trauma of forgiveness. After Isaiah says, “Woe is me; I’m falling apart,” we read in Isaiah 6:6-7: “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. **7**And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”

In his mercy, God takes away Isaiah’s sins and perfections. He atones for his sins (which means to make restitution for past mistakes). God cleanses him. But note how he does it: with a burning coal! The coal is so hot that even the “burning one,” the seraph, must use tongs to handle it.

And then note how the seraph applied the cleansing power of the coal to Isaiah: the seraph touched Isaiah’s lips with it. Our lips are among the most sensitive part of human flesh. We do the most delicate act, kissing, with our lips.

Yes, Isaiah’s sins are atoned for, he is reconciled to God, ***but no one can say it was easy.*** Isaiah’s relief at being forgiven by God was accompanied by the smell of his own burning flesh.

***It’s a sweet gift, finding your sins atoned for, but it’s accompanied by suffering.*** Friends, when you meet a holy God through the sacrificial work of his son Jesus Christ, you will find that God’s forgiveness has a traumatic effect on your life. Sins you once enjoyed you can’t make yourself enjoy any longer. Dreams you once had for your life are now shattered. And perhaps most difficult of all, people in your life who have hurt you and you swore you’d never forgive, now you have to forgive them and find ways to pray for them and love them.

Many people in our society think that Christianity is just one of several perfectly good spiritual or therapeutic options out there to choose from. We hear things like, “Oh, you believe in Jesus? That’s great ***if he fulfills you***. You should believe in Jesus if he fulfills you, if you get something out of it. But don’t insist other people believe in Jesus. After all, he might not fulfill them.”

You know what the apostle Paul would say to that? He would say, “Do you think I’m a Christian because Jesus fulfilled me? No! I didn’t want to believe in Jesus. There was nothing fulfilling about him to me at all. He was a threat to everything I had! He was a threat to my righteousness, a threat to my control of my own life, a threat to everything. It was traumatic to be forgiven by God, because while my sins were atoned for my life was turned completely upside down.”

Is being a Christian personally fulfilling? Yes, it is, just not like what we usually think that word means, because while no one is sweeter than Jesus Christ and nothing else is a meaningful as following Jesus Christ, ***no one is more demanding than Jesus Christ either.*** In Luke 14:28-30, he warns those of us who might follow him about this: “For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? **29**Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, **30**saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’” Count the cost, Jesus says, before you follow me.

Third, the trauma of evangelism. Perhaps the most famous verse in all of Isaiah is verse 8: “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me.’” Thousands of missionary sermons have been preaching on this text, and perhaps tens of thousands of missionaries have been inspired by this verse to serve.

But those sermons almost never include the verses immediately following: “And he [God] said, ‘Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.” **10**Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’” Isaiah 6:9-10.

It is odd. God calls Isaiah to preach then tells him up ***front he’s going to spend his whole life preaching to people who won’t listen to him.*** It’s these verses, not the famous verse eight, or the mind-blowing verses 1-5, which are most quoted in the New Testament. Five times they are quoted: once in each of the four gospels and again in the book of Acts.

Friends, if you do have an encounter with a holy God and then you receive his forgiveness in Jesus Christ, you know what will happen? You will want to tell others what happened to you. More than that, you’ll want them to meet God and receive his forgiveness themselves.

You’ll want to tell others about Jesus. That’s called evangelism. You’ll want others to hear the gospel, the evangel, of Jesus Christ. And you’ll want to tell others not because you feel guilted into it or because you feel obligated, but because it’s the best and most powerful thing that’s ever happened to you. It’s changed your life and given you hope and purpose you could not have dreamed of having before. You meet the real Jesus and no one’s going to have to tell you that you should want to tell others about him, because ***you always talk about what you think about, and you think about what you love.***

But evangelism is a difficult thing, because many, many people won’t pay any attention to what you say. Do you have any idea how many people have ignored my preaching over the years? It’s got to be getting into the thousands.

Evangelism is hard, and it’s also, in a sense, dangerous, because every time someone hears the gospel they come away from it either a little closer or a little further away from God. They come away with hearts that are either a little softer than they were before, or a little more hardened than they were before, ***but they don’t walk away unchanged.***

This morning some of you are getting closer to God than ever before because of what you’re hearing, but some of you are a step closer to hell. That’s just the way it is when the gospel is preached.

In verses 11-12, God tells Isaiah that he will preach and preach and preach and beg the people to turn to God, yet they won’t repent. Some of you know what that’s like. You’ve shared the gospel with someone you love, you’ve prayed and prayed and prayed, and twenty, thirty years in, they still don’t believe, and you fear they are heading for destruction.

But then we read the very last verse, verse 13: “And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.” Isaiah 6:13 (NIV 1984). God says, “Because they won’t listen to me, I’m going to cut Israel down like trees, then I’ll burn the stumps. But even though only stumps are left, Isaiah, your message will be like a seed in the stump, and from it I’ll build my people again.”

Friends, evangelism is hard work, the world won’t appreciate it, and you may never see the fruit of it. That’s hard to hear. You might say it’s traumatizing. But if you’ve met God then you can be sure you’re planting seeds when you evangelize, and while you may never know when they’ll bear fruit, and while you may never see them bear fruit, *you can be sure some will*. There’s always hope in evangelism, because evangelism involves the Word of God, and the Word of God is potent.

Later in Isaiah we read this: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, **11**so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Isaiah 55:10-11.

If you’ve met God, if you’ve been overwhelmed by his holiness, and you’ve received his forgiveness, then no matter how everything looks, you can be sure God is accomplishing his purposes because a holy God is a trustworthy God. You can be glad and at peace, even when you have no idea what he was up to, because God is worth it. And, like Isaiah, you can say, “Here am I, Lord. Whatever you want done. Send me.” PRAY