

Woe Is Me!

Isaiah 6:1—8 (v. 5)

Introduction

Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus said, *“I am with you always to the end of the age”* (**Matthew 28:20**). Yet, in a very real way, when we gather for Word and Sacrament, we are coming into the presence of God. Unfortunately, many people see it as merely “going to church.” The room we gather in is called a sanctuary, meaning a safe place from the rest of the world. Look at the ceiling. It’s made to represent an upside-down ship. The part of the sanctuary where the congregation gathers is called the *nave*, Latin for ship. This is the ark in which we are saved and transported to heaven. In our Old Testament reading today, Isaiah was in a sacred space.

Who Was Isaiah?

Isaiah was a prophet who prophesied *during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah* (**Isaiah 1:1**). He has come into the temple to worship. But something happened that he wasn’t expecting.

Sacred Space and Presence (v. 1)

Isaiah *saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple* (**Isaiah 6:1**). Of course, the Lord doesn’t sit like people do. This was an accommodation He made for Isaiah. Different people had seen God at different times. And they had seen Him differently. Abraham, Moses, Ezekiel, Daniel, and others all saw God to one degree or another, but none had the same experience. When the Bible talks about God sitting, it is either as Judge or King. Here, He is on a throne, high and lifted up; He is King.

The Seraphim (v. 2)

Isaiah describes seraphim, a class of angelic beings. Scholars disagree on how many seraphim there were. Many think two, and some think many, since they were *around the throne* (**v. 2**). What’s important here is what they each did with his *six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew* (**v. 2**). They covered their faces in reverence and their bodies in modesty. John Chrysostom, 4th Century bishop of Constantinople, said: *Do you perceive with what dread, with what awe, [the seraphim] pronounce that name while glorifying and praising Him? But you, in your prayers and supplications, call upon Him with such listlessness; when it would become you to be full of awe and to be watchful and sober* (**Homily Concerning the Statues 7.9**). We could take a lesson from these angelic beings and their respect and reverence for God. As far as holiness goes, they were on a par with God. But they still showed this great respect and reverence for His supreme majesty. In our sinfulness, how much more respect, awe, and fear should we have when we come into church or approach the throne of grace through prayer. We see this lack of respect more and more. I have heard a youth pastor begin each public prayer with, “Hey God ...” as if God were some mere surfer dude friend. While Jesus is a “friend of sinners,” He is still God Almighty, King of kings, and Lord of lords. Let’s treat Him as such.

Holy, Holy, Holy (v. 3)

As they flew around the throne, the seraphim called out, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!*” (v. 3). In Hebrew, the repetition of an adjective denotes superiority. The three-fold repetition signifies the Trinity. The seraphim tell us who this Lord of hosts is. This is also where we get the *Sanctus* that follows the prayer of the proper preface in the Communion service: *Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might: heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosannah in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosannah in the highest.* The last part, beginning with *hosannah in the highest*, comes from the Triumphal Entry in **Matthew 21**.

The Foundations Shook (v. 4)

God’s holiness, his purity and transcendence are so great that *the foundations of the thresholds shook* with His presence and *the house was filled with smoke* (v. 4) as God’s *train filled the temple* (v. 1). Such was the majesty of God as experienced by Isaiah.

Paper and Fire (v. 5)

Isaiah’s response was not joy at being admitted to see God. It was fear for his life. “*Woe is me!*” (v. 5) means that he thought he was as good as dead. He thought this because he recognized his own sinfulness. Isaiah would have been considered a good man by anyone’s standard. How could he say he was a man of unclean lips? Isaiah recognized that the only standard that matters is God’s standard, and that’s one of pure holiness. When we, as sinful human beings come into the presence of God, it’s like putting paper in the presence of a hot fire. Get it too close and the paper burns up.

Confession and Absolution (v. 6—7)

As Isaiah confesses his sin, *one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for”* (v. 6—7). What is it about a hot coal that makes one holy by touching it to their lips? This is an image of the grace of God. There is nothing Isaiah can do about his sin. Only God can take it away because Christ has atoned for it by His death on the cross. And God applies this atonement when Isaiah realizes his sinfulness and confesses it. When we come into God’s presence, we begin with Confession and Absolution to prepare us to hear the Word and receive the Sacrament. The sin must be atoned for.

Mission (v. 8)

Once God has removed his sin, He has a job for Isaiah: “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” to which Isaiah quickly and boldly replies, “*Here I am! Send me*” (v. 8). Isaiah’s fear and trepidation have been changed into eager boldness by a touch from God. When we come into worship, we are saying, “Woe is me” because of our sin in the presence of a righteous and holy God. After being touched and cleansed by Him, God has a mission for us, to go to our homes and spread His Word to those around us. May we, with Isaiah, say, “Here I am! Send me.”

*And the peace of God
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
