

“Holy God...Holy Spirit...Holy People” (fn.:DOCUMENT263)

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8 and Leviticus 19:2

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Our first lesson is from Isaiah 6—the mystical vision of God that takes place for the prophet in the Temple.

Isaiah 6:1-8: *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!”

Our second lesson comes from Leviticus and connects with the threefold “holy, holy, holy” in Isaiah’s vision:

Leviticus 19:2: *Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*

Our focus for the past several Sundays has been on spirituality as we are particularly focused on God’s Holy Spirit. “Holy” is the defining characteristic—not just any spirit, but the **HOLY** Spirit. So our Scripture readings focus on this attribute of “holy.” First we have the mystic experience of the prophet Isaiah in the temple—he sees the Lord of hosts on the throne. And he hears the hosts of heaven proclaim: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. God is threefold “holy.” And our second Scripture—one short verse from Leviticus: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” The holiness of God is to wash over us, making us like God, making us like God’s Spirit.

The root meaning of “holy” is this: to set apart, to be special, to have an exclusive use. Holy is like this: many of you remember when there was special china and silverware that was only used for specific meals and occasions. That is the gist of holy—it is NOT ordinary and common but rather extraordinary and uncommon. And what is extraordinary and uncommon evokes special attention and care.

God’s Spirit is not generic...but it is the Holy Spirit. Our spirituality is also not “generic”—we are to have a holy spirituality. To put “holy” in marketing terms, “holy” is the top product of the church. Clubs, fraternities, sororities, and the like offer community. Theme-parks and games offer entertainment. Schools offer education. Jobs offer purpose and focus. But “holy” is by and large the most distinct product of faith—no one else is in the “business” of holy.

Here is the primary challenge of “holy”—are we any different from being in the presence of the holy

God, touched by the Holy Spirit? Are we different? Do Christians argue and fight less than non-Christians? Is our divorce-rate lower than the general population? Do we have less mental illness or addictions? Are criminal courts filled with more non-Christians than Christians? In other words, when we have been touched by the Holy Spirit, what's distinctive and identifiable?

Using the experience of Isaiah, we find that the “holy” connects with our lives: Holy, Holy, Holy. So we might number these as Holy One, Holy Two, and Holy Three.

Holy One: one of the characteristic signs that we are in the presence of the holy is that we feel not only small and inadequate but confront that we fail, that we err, that we are one with that crowd that has “left undone those things that we ought to have done and have done those things that we ought not to have done.” So, for example, in the presence of holiness of God, Isaiah says: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Isaiah is saying: “I am a failure and come from a family of failures.”

By and large, the generic “divine spirit” in nature—the beauty of the world around, the friendships and loves that move us, and the like—that spirit does not ask for our repentance. So, for example, when the yoga instructor begins to say to me that the divine light in her connects with the divine light in me, I am pleased that we can share the exercise moment, that we can take deep breaths, that we can be at peace with one another. Namaste! That's “Peace be with you” in yoga-talk! But there is no call to repentance in that divine light.

God's Holy Spirit, in contrast, brings about a sense of unworthiness, of being unclean, dirty. Glenn Chestnut, a Methodist minister and a regular in the A.A. recovery programs, addresses this sense of being dirty or unclean in this way: God's response is not anger or wrath but rather hope and expectation. Imagine an antique dealer discovering an old table at a garage sale, covered with peeling paint, filthy and dirty. But what the dealer sees is a fine Louis-the-whatever piece of antique furniture. It can be restored perfectly. All of us are a restoration project for God—God wants to restore the fine lines of God's original handiwork beneath all the grime and cheap paint. Chestnut concludes: “So God does not mind me appearing before him, still dirtied with shameful deeds, but on the contrary is delighted to see me, as long as I allow him to start healing and restoring me, one little step at a time...”¹

And in what Glenn Chestnut calls the “healing” presence of the holy is Holy Two: We know the presence of the holy as we move from the sense of unworthiness (Holy One) to a desire to act worthy, to be clean (Holy Two). The prophet Isaiah is made clean in the Temple in his mystical experience. The angel touches his lips and tells him: “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” It is the model for that moment in worship each Sunday—“In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.”

When we come into the presence of the holy, we know our unworthiness but are also awakened to a desire to live differently—remember “holy” means being different. And, I suppose, this is where holy gets the bad rap—to be holy is be a “goody-goody” or worse—to be self-righteous! But still the holy is connected with doing the right thing. Again, Glenn Chestnut, with his participation in A.A. recovery, provides insight. He notes:

¹ Glenn F. Chestnut, “The Seven Faces of the Experience of the Divine Reality: Rudolf Otto and the Idea of the Holy, Part 2,” p. 16 at <http://hindsfoot.org/g05myst.pdf> as of 7/12/2017.

...it has been found repeatedly that people cannot be in close contact with the realm of the numinous [holy] when their minds are totally taken over by resentments that will not go away, by unrelenting self-pity, by worldly fears that gnaw and nag at them continuously, and by anxieties that keep them perpetually on edge. Once people are far enough along in the spiritual life, they take great pains to act as morally as they can, not because they are afraid that God will not love them if they do not do so, and not because they believe that God will reward them for acting morally, but because they have found that only by acting morally can they keep resentment, self-pity, fear, and anxiety from blocking them from the full experience of the sacred. There is a kind of paradoxical quasi-selfishness to this, because it is only by acting in a totally unselfish manner that I can gain real peace and joy and the experience of the numinous [holy] for myself.²

We do the right things when we experience the holy, not because we can be sure to achieve it, but rather because that is the surest way to quiet the distractions, attractions, and drives that foul us up. We act holy in order to be better available for the experience.

So here is where we are: Holy One: First, we know we are touched by holiness—by the Holy Spirit—when we repent about things that we have done and we have left undone. Holy Two: Second, we know we are touched by holiness—by the Holy Spirit—when we long to do the right thing, not to earn our way into heaven, but rather because we find a deeper joy in doing what is right. But still there is one more characteristic...one more holy.

Here is Holy Three: As evidenced in this account of Isaiah, Isaiah hears what God wants and Isaiah asks to be sent! More than just being virtuous—to be kind and fair; more than being merciful and just, Isaiah hears of God's mission, and he says: "Here am I, send me." Someone needs to go...someone needs to be the messenger, be the witness, be the instrument of God. And Isaiah says: "It's me; send me."

You know it is the Holy Spirit when you sense that calling—you have something to do for God. In church language, we used to call this "finding your vocation," but we have secularized the word "vocation" to mean "job." The root meaning of "vocation," coming from the Latin word *vocare*, means "calling"—answering God's call.

Some years back, a Lutheran pastor worked up a plan for his congregation called the "Ministry of the Laity"—not the ministry of the preacher-types but the ministry of the congregation. The plan addressed four areas of vocation—the ministry of the laity. First, everyone has a vocation in their household or family. You are sent to them...by God! God sends me to my family (sometimes perhaps they wish God sent someone else!). Second, everyone has vocation in their primary focus. What's your primary focus? Job, school, being retired, and so on. In those "have-to" tasks, you are sent...by God! And third, everyone has a vocation in their community—clubs, neighborhood, government, PTA, Habitat, Family Promise. You have a role in the neighborhood—across the street, across town, across the ocean. You are sent...by God! And, finally, everyone has a vocation in the church. You are sent...by God!

For example, take your worship attendance. Remember the language we use for worship—we say this is a "service of worship." A service! You are serving when you are gathered together for

² *Ibid.*, page 13.

worship. Some years back, in another congregation, Jimmy Dunn would come into worship rolling his oxygen machine that would go “swish” every few seconds—pumping oxygen for him. Jimmy Dunn needed that oxygen to live. Jimmy was so apologetic for being a disturbance—the rigmarole to get him to a pew, the sound of the “swish” in the midst of the worship, and so on. But his presence reminded us all that there were a lot of us that almost didn’t show up for worship—and we had much lamer excuses and silly rationalizations. Jimmy Dunn came with his oxygen machine—his presence reminded us of the privilege, the honor, the rightness of being together in worship. Jimmy served...just by being there.

Holy, Holy, Holy—the Holy Spirit is among us. And we know that Spirit in this way: Holy One: we know our unworthiness—we all need a Savior. Holy Two: we are drawn to habits of grace, gentleness, honesty, even sacrifices. Holy Three: God has a mission for you and me and our response is “Here am I, send me.” Holy, Holy, Holy!