

Part I.

- A. No one cares about him today. Very few know he ever lived or ever even heard his name. But once, he was the anchor for a nation. Uzziah. He became king of Judah when he was only 16 and he reigned from Jerusalem for *52 years!* Half a century. Most of his subjects couldn't remember any other king. And such a time it was. Prosperous. Stable. Good crops. Strong army. Then the proud nation and proud king started to slip. Uzziah, this often good and godly king, decided he'd go into the temple where only priests were allowed. And God struck him in that moment with leprosy. Uzziah fled from God's presence and went into forced seclusion for the rest of his days, while his son ran the kingdom. Then when Uzziah had been king for 50 years, a new superpower arose to the northeast—Assyria (today's Iraq)—and their ruler was ravenous to expand his kingdom. Countries made desperate alliances. War was in the air. No one felt safe anymore. Judah's army looked puny compared to Assyria. And then, Uzziah died. The nation gasped. The future looked dark indeed that year that King Uzziah died.
- B. Our year looks pretty dark, too, doesn't it? The financial mess we are in is as almost as scary as an enemy at our border. Faraway wars in Palestine or Afghanistan or Congo are as dangerous to us as if they were in Wisconsin. So much hope in President-elect Obama, but his eloquence and intelligence notwithstanding, I fear he—and every other leader we know—is out of his league.
- C. But things are not always as they seem. Turn in your Bible to our text for this new year, **Isaiah 6**. V.1: *"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple."* No one knows for sure, but I suspect that Isaiah was in the temple courts in Jerusalem when he had this vision. But God pulled back the vast curtain hiding heaven from earth, and Isaiah saw what was *always* happening in God's temple but which no one had ever seen: the Lord seated on a throne. **Judah in that year that Uzziah died, was *not* without a king! God reigned!** And he *"was high and exalted,"* where all things on earth fell under his supervision and where all creatures in heaven and earth must defer to his sovereign authority. God's royal robes cascaded from the throne filling the whole temple with folds of royalty. When the temple in Jerusalem had been dedicated by Solomon the Bible says the glory of God filled the temple like a cloud. *"And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple"* [1 Kgs 8:11]. Perhaps that cloud was the train, the expansive cape, of God's royal robes!

Added to this breathtaking sight were those unique heavenly beings (v.2): *"Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying."* The word *seraph* means 'burning one.' Flaming beings with six wings. Remember the old adage, *"Form follows function."* God created these beings just for this particular place of service near his throne. Perhaps they needed to be flaming, lest they themselves be consumed. They needed their six wings. They needed two wings just to cover their fiery faces for even creatures of flame cannot look on the Lord, who himself is a consuming fire, without being consumed. They needed two wings to cover their feet, for this ground near to God is so holy that even seraphs must show respect. And they needed two wings to fly—to constantly move about the glory of God.

More important than how they look is what they say (v.3): *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."* Don't they ever say anything else? Wouldn't even such a sublime announcement lose its luster after awhile? Are they more simple-minded than us so that this is enough to keep them occupied eternally? Oh, I think it is just the opposite. They constantly consider the range and reach of God's holiness—his unique and unparalleled glory, his endless perfections of every attribute and thought, his infinity; *"how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ"*—and their great minds and hearts are ever amazed, always captivated. The three-times repeated, "Holy, holy, holy," is a not only because no other words will do, but a kind of super superlative way of

speaking. *Holy, holier, holiest!* They look across all God has made, all that he sustains, all that he loves, and they are eternally inspired to their ceaseless eloquence.

No wonder the doorposts and threshold of God's temple tremble at their worship! It isn't the thundering *volume* of their praise, but the earth-shattering *truth* of it all that makes God's temple shake!

- D. In 2009, as in the year that King Uzziah died, things are not as they seem. Do not fear what others fear. Do not make foolish bargains or deadly alliances. The Lord Almighty is on his throne and he is holy! He is the one we are to fear.

Part II.

We tear our eyes from this sight to look back at Isaiah, expecting to see his own eyes as dazzled as ours, but instead we see abject terror; we see hopeless guilt written all over that righteous man's face! **V.5:** *"Woe to me!" I cried. "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."*

- A. People have never grasped how dangerous the holy God is. We are dealing with a God who is King of all, and more, who is holy—for whom perfect righteousness, absolute goodness, honesty, justice and love—are the *only* way. We are dealing with a God, for crying out loud, who is attended by sinless flaming ones, who yet cover their faces and feet!
- B. We are so insanely cavalier about God. Think of all our casual oaths—the way people text *"OMG"* or say, *"my God,"* and don't even remember it! We use his name in ways we wouldn't use our own. We rail in anger against him when he does not do what we think he must do. Even our most benign and lofty talk—of our plans, or our ideas, or ourselves—is foul because God is not in it. The words of philosophers, politicians, self-help gurus, teachers and dreamers who pay little heed to God are fouled, stained, unclean. Our death sentence is on our lips: We can surely say with Isaiah, *"I am a man of unclean lips."* What's more, it is all we know. *"I live among a people of unclean lips."* Our culture is full of God-empty, lip-filthy talk.

If seraphs, whose eyes have never seen the filth we look at, if seraphs whose feet have never walked in the dirt we travel, if the seraphs cover their flaming faces and fiery feet lest they be consumed, then what hope do we have? If the flaming ones must take care, they whose constant conversation is, *"Holy, holy, holy,"* there is no hope—*none*—for people whose hearts and speech have been so foul, so false, so fruitless. We are ruined, undone, done for!

Why can't I see this? Because it is only in God's presence that we see ourselves as we are.

- C. But all is not as it seems! Because **God, the exalted and holy King, is not willing that anyone should perish.** **V.6:** *"Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar."* I believe the coal in the seraph's hand came from the altar of sacrifice where the Lamb of God was offered, where his blood was spilled and consumed in the coals. The flaming seraph carried that blood-coal in his fiery hand across the trembling threshold of the temple and touched the coal to Isaiah's lips. We wince, but all is not as it seems!

"With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'" Isaiah does not recoil in blistered pain, as we'd expect. Rather this holy ember makes his unclean lips and heart as clean as the seraph's. Guilt was taken away—as far as the east is from the west, buried in the deepest sea. Sin was atoned for; someone paid for it, died for it. Someone took Isaiah's place on that altar of sacrifice. Someone's blood was on that coal. Isaiah himself would write, *"he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; ... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."*

The cleansing of God can seem as scary as the holiness of God. The approach of the live coal to our lips would make anyone tremble. This will hurt? This will burn? But what hope do I have without it. Repentance and forgiveness are not for the fainthearted! But oh how we need to clean lips! How we

need to be forgiven! How we need to have our sin atoned for! **And when God's holy grace has touched us it is not the burning we will remember, but the cleansing!**

- D. Things are not always what they seem. What most people fear in the year ahead is not our greatest danger. What truly threatens to undo us, to ruin us, is our unclean lips and the filthy hearts within us that stains them. *"Woe is me!"* But this holy King, high and exalted, is not impassive. He is not willing that any should perish, and he has given himself to atone for our sin.

Part III.

Why did God give Isaiah this vision? Why did all this drama happen? Well, of course, so that Isaiah—and we—would see the truth about God's holiness and our unclean lips. But it is all leading somewhere. Finally, in **v.8**, the Lord Almighty speaks: *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!"*

- A. God created us to serve him as surely as he created those seraphs to attend to him. We are as perfectly suited to serving God here in this gospel-resistant world as those flaming ones are to their position near God. *Except* for our unclean hearts and lips. But once we have seen the Lord's glory and been cleansed by the Lord's grace we are ready to do what we were created to do—serve the Lord. *"Here am I. Here I am. Consider me! Send me!"*
- B. What God gave Isaiah was what we might call the "Not-So- Great Commission in vv.9-10: *"Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."* Jesus used this verse to explain why he spoke in parables that the people really didn't understand. John used this verse to explain why people did not believe in Jesus despite his miraculous signs and life-saving words. Paul used these words at the very end of his life, in Acts 28, to explain why Jews would not respond to the gospel.

This is often our lot, too, in a gospel-dulled society. I don't know about you, but I realize that there are many times when I don't speak of my faith in Christ, even when I have an opportunity, because I am pretty sure how the news will be received. They'll listen but they won't understand. They'll look but they won't see. So I remain silent. But perhaps I am to speak even knowing that my speaking of Jesus will actually dull people's hearts.

- C. But it is not always that way. Isaiah himself spoke to a remnant of tender-hearted, open-eyed people who laid hold of the hope he held out to them. Many *did* listen to Jesus and to Paul. There are those God has prepared to hear, to see—and they are waiting for you and me to tell them of God's holiness and grace, to tell them of judgment and salvation. And they will believe.
- D. Illus.: Daniel Sweetser told me that in his first year here at Trinity, this passage was on his mind. He began to beg God to show him his glory. *"How can I serve you the rest of my life,"* he prayed, *"if you don't show me your glory?"* He wanted something that would motivate him for life. Months passed and then Daniel saw it. He told me, *"God showed me Jesus and if that isn't enough for me I have a problem!"*

Do you know what John wrote in **Jn. 12:41**? He quotes v.10 here about the people who did not respond even when they saw Jesus' miraculous signs, and then he says, *"Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him"*! The Lord on a throne whom Isaiah saw? That was Jesus! Jesus said, *"When [the person who believes in me] looks at me, he sees the one who sent me"* [Jn 12:45]. And God has revealed Jesus to us in the pages of this Bible, and in our very hearts by his own Holy Spirit. Daniel was right: *"God showed me Jesus and if that isn't enough for me I have a problem!"*

- E. The year behind us was, for many people, very dark, and 2009 is murkier still. But here is the astonishing thing. **We are God's lights in this dark world.** *If we see the Lord on his throne, if we are*

stunned into repentance by his holiness, *if* our lips are cleansed by his forgiveness in Christ. *Then* we are in this world as those flaming ones in heaven. This is our mandate as the church of Jesus Christ.

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!"