

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday After Epiphany, January 19, 2020

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 249, 482:1, 641, 488, 496.

Lessons: Isaiah 55:1-11, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Luke 5:1-11.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 6:1-8.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our sermon text is from chapter 6 of Isaiah, but the first five chapters of the book of Isaiah jump right into his prophecies for the nation of Judah. The Old Testament nation that we think of as “Israel” had been divided into two kingdoms called Israel in the North and Judah. Israel was composed of the northern tribes, and Judah was the area of one tribe, the tribe from which the Savior would be born.

In the book of Isaiah, the longest book of prophecy in the Old Testament, Isaiah preached and taught during the reign of four kings of Judah. God sent Isaiah to announce his judgment on his people and call them to repentance. Yet they continued in their rebellion and sin. But Isaiah also announced the love and mercy of God and watched sadly as God’s people refused to listen. Then, in chapter 6, Isaiah records his calling to be a prophet of the Lord.

Since the time of Isaiah, God has gathered people from other nations as guests for his banquet of mercy and grace in the Messiah. And so for us in 2020, Isaiah’s words are also a source of great comfort and strength.

In every age since the fall into sin, some people listen, some don’t. Cain and his brother Abel are the first illustration found in Scripture of this. Even now, you know people who listen to God’s Words and those who don’t.

We all know the first commandment: “**You shall have no other gods.** *What does this mean?* We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” But do we really know and understand what it means?

Isaiah got a very clear idea of what it means as we today look at

RESPECT AND HONOR FOR GOD

- 1. Seraphim show tremendous respect and honor to God.**
- 2. Isaiah was unworthy,**
- 3. But the Lord cleansed him.**
- 4. What does this mean for us?**
- 5. What kind of respect and honor do we have for God?**

Isaiah records his calling to be God’s prophet in these verses. Isaiah presented in a very graphic way the phrase we see so often, “This is what the Lord says”, “Thus saith the Lord.” This vision – with its triple repetition, “**Holy, holy, holy**” makes it very clear that the words Isaiah records come from the LORD Almighty – God the Father – and from the Holy One of Israel – God the Son. And, of course, because the Holy Ghost caused all Scriptures to be written for our learning, these words are plainly the words of God the Holy Spirit.

“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. 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. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.” This is the only place in Scripture where these spiritual beings, the seraphs, also called seraphim, are mentioned in Scripture. God caused other of

his holy beings – invisible to us humans unless he permitted them to be seen as recorded in the Scriptures – to appear, but these creatures are unique. We only know about them what Scripture says here.

The action of these heavenly beings is far more important than any speculation about their special position among the angels. With their wings they hid their faces and covered their feet. They were not worthy to be in the presence of the Lord, and their actions revealed their great reverence, honor, and respect for God and their great humility in his presence. These powerful and holy creatures considered themselves unworthy to stand with uncovered feet and faces in the presence of God – so great is the holiness of God! Isaiah saw them flying, hovering above the throne and calling out to one another praising the Lord. The occupation of these heavenly beings is praise; and here they called to one another ***“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”*** The truest worship of God is such pure and simple praise and confession. The smoke represents the smoke of incense, suggesting prayers rising to God.

God’s seraphim, special creatures, have such great reverence and honor for God! Yet, think for a moment about how casually we sometimes approach God and his Word.

The vision is a profound revelation of God and should inspire us to awe and reverence. The building itself shook at the sound of the angels. The angels covered themselves with reverential awe. In contrast we must realize how foolish is the ridicule of unbelievers! Limited and sinful humans poke fun at things they cannot understand or see, particularly the things God reveals in his Holy Word. The word “foolish” seems inadequate to describe the arrogance of unbelief in light of this vision, with the trembling of the heavenly temple and the reverence of the angels. By comparison with this vision, human ridicule of God and his ways comes from arrogant ignorance of the reality of God. Unbelief remains opposed to and ignorant of the enormous power and superiority of the true God. Unbelief scoffs at all who know the truth.

Yet to make one application of this greatness of God, perhaps the greatest wonder is that God did not and does not destroy the arrogant unbelievers immediately. He allows them to continue so that they have a time of grace to turn from their sins or sadly, so that they may persist and confirm the judgment upon them which God threatens. While they persist, God sends prophets to them, sometimes even calling to them as Jesus called to Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane with the simple address ***“Friend, . . .”*** (Matthew 26:50). When Jesus was mocked and taunted by unbelievers, he did not come down from the cross and punish them. He stayed there to accomplish forgiveness even for his mockers as well as for all the world. Judgment will come, but it would come after all unbelief and arrogance reveals itself.

Isaiah himself was impressed with a deep sense of unworthiness. ***“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.”***

God had told Moses: ***“you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”*** Exodus 33:20 (NIV) Yet God revealed himself in this very dramatic way to Isaiah. God took away his guilt and atoned for his sin in a symbolic action. One of the seraphim carried a live, burning coal from the altar of this heavenly temple and touched the prophet's mouth. The coal came from the altar, the place of sacrifice. The message of absolution is clear: ***“Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”*** Sinners who acknowledge their sins are not abandoned. God had made Isaiah a believer, a saint, through the atonement of Jesus Christ and his forgiveness. This was accomplished by the suffering and death of Jesus. For every believer before Jesus came into the world, this was especially an act of faith. We today have the whole picture, the “rest of the story”. In Isaiah’s day they had only words of prophecy looking forward to the Savior’s coming. We have it all recorded for us in the Holy Scriptures.

Later in his book of prophecy, Isaiah will write eloquently about the work of Jesus. Here Isaiah was assured that he could now stand before God. His status was changed by God's act, not by any human effort or desire. It was by grace, not by works. It is always by grace and not by works.

And in this way God gave his divine call to Isaiah for his ministry. It serves as a reminder to all called servants of God. Before God, all people, including pastors and all leaders in the church and those who teach our children, confess like Isaiah, ***“Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips.”*** Service to God begins with the knowledge of human limitations and sin. If Isaiah was unfit for ministry, so is every public minister of God who has ever served. All the study, all the prayers, all the effort make no one better than Isaiah.

Because of our sin, we are all unfit for ministry and serving God in any way. Failing to understand the reality of this vision can only make servants of God presumptuous and arrogant.

Yes, we must recognize that there is much unbelief in the world. But we are not immune from unbelief and arrogance and rejection of God.

Although Isaiah was unworthy, the Lord cleansed him. However, not only is the prophet, sinful man that he was, assured of the grace of God, but the Lord also imparts special strength to him and fits him to be the instrument of God's message. He writes: ***“Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’ 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!’”*** Isaiah is called and he receives and accepts the calling from God to proclaim and teach the Words of God.

God knows our hearts. He sees us as we truly are. And he cleanses us, too, with the blood and sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, whom we may now call our Lord!

What does this picture from the words of Isaiah mean for us? We, too, just like Isaiah, are unworthy to stand before God. We sometimes approach him casually, as if we think we can take his grace or leave it. After all, we think, there is always another day we can approach God, isn't there? But during the Minnesota winter the weather may get in the way and we are not always able to have our public worship service. We always think that there is another day we can approach God. But our days are in his hand, and he has our lifespan measured. We often approach God even in our public worship services as if his Words and even his meal of forgiveness – the Lord's Supper – are no big deal. We often don't think about what we are really receiving.

All the good things that we think we do are like filthy rags. Isaiah himself tells us later in his book: ***“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”*** Isaiah 64:6 (NIV) But God still offers us the message and assurance of forgiveness. His words are given to us for us to believe.

We can imagine lots of symbolism in our text. The burning coal could suggest the fire of hell, which Christ endured. The coal placed on his tongue offering cleansing and forgiveness to Isaiah should have burned his tongue. Jesus Christ suffered the pains of hell, and hell is pictured in the Bible as a lake of burning sulfur. He atoned for our sins and the sins and disobedience and lack of respect and honor to God. He redeemed us from the fires of hell by his work on earth. We must feel the pains of our sins and how we have offended God and our fellow humans – even those who are closest to us. We, with penitent hearts, will want to confess our sins and how they have hurt even our closest loved ones.

Our tongues should burn with all the terrible things we've said, and then, as we are touched by the forgiveness from God we will know and perhaps even emotionally feel the forgiveness of God, although our emotions are not the important thing. The objective, factual message of forgiveness is the important thing, and we can cry for joy that our sins are forgiven.

Believers learn to despair of help except in God. They turn to him in prayer and rejoice in the message of his Word. Then the Holy Spirit through the Word of God strengthens, comforts, and sustains. He speaks to us in his Word and gives us healing and comfort there. That is God's plan.

So what kind of honor and respect do we have for God and show to him? How can we show God the honor and respect that he deserves? Well, even on earth, you don't know what someone wants unless you listen to him. So we must also listen to God. And he speaks to us in his written word, not in visions as Isaiah received and recorded.

Today we hear again a reminder to look to God's Word. Hear God's Word. Gladly hear and learn it! May we all always listen to, and really hear God's Word. And as the Lord calls us to do his work, may we, too, say ***“Here am I. Send me!”*** Amen.