

"What Isaiah Saw":
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for May 27th 2018 (Trinity Sunday)
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Isaiah 6: 1-8

I should begin by acknowledging—acknowledging right from the get-go—that the question I am implicitly asking this morning, namely: what did the Prophet Isaiah see at the time of his call to prophetic ministry...

...a call which, intriguingly, doesn't turn up until we are into the sixth chapter of the book that bears Isaiah's name...

...it should be acknowledged that the question as to what, precisely, the prophet Isaiah saw as he stood within the Jerusalem Temple on that fateful day: it should be acknowledged that this is actually something of a trick question. It's not that Isaiah did not see something; clearly he saw a great deal, and what he saw was more than extraordinary. It's just that Isaiah doesn't provide a whole lot of information concerning the thing you and I are likely to be most curious about: namely the countenance of the One he saw seated on the Temple throne. Especially if we compare Isaiah's account with the much fuller accounts found in the call story of the prophet Ezekiel, the description provided in the seventh chapter of Daniel, or even the fourth chapter of Revelation, Isaiah's account is remarkably sparse.

Mind you! Of the seraphim—the archangels who surround the throne—Isaiah does provide a fascinating snap-shot: noting that each seraphim has six wings, two of which covered their face, two of which covered their feet, and two of which they used to fly. Of the Temple itself, Isaiah describes the thick smoke that filled the Temple, as well as the shaking-of-the foundations that he experienced as he stood before the throne. But of the One occupying the throne, all he can tell us...

...at any rate, all he is prepared to tell us...

...is that: *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.* The train of his robe! **That's** what Isaiah saw, at least that's all he is claiming to have seen. An overwhelming experience to be sure! But a description that provides no details as to the visage of the One who sat upon the throne, as the angels flew, as smoke darkened, as foundations shook. The train of his robe. Nothing less! But nothing more!

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Of course, none of that ought to come as a surprise, given the Biblical emphasis on hearing rather than on sight. *Faith comes through hearing*, as the Apostle Paul insists in his letter to the Church in Rome: an insight of Paul's that is well-grounded in the piety of the Old Testament, a piety which (on the one hand) cautions that those who

see the face of God risk losing their life, but which (on the other hand) is filled with the prophetic words of those such as Isaiah, who dare to insist that they have heard God's own speech and are prepared boldly to share that which they claim to have heard. From a Biblical perspective—Old and New Testament alike—faith, indeed, comes through hearing: which highlights the point that far more important than the things Isaiah got to **see** at the time of his call...

...the smoke, the angels, the building itself rocking and reeling, the throne of God and even the robe of God, impressive as all of that must have been...

...more important still than the sights that must have threatened to overwhelm his vision, are the sounds he **heard** as the angels circled God's throne.

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!:"*

words which have profoundly impacted Jewish and Christian worship as well as Jewish and Christian understandings of the identity of the God we worship. In terms of God's identity, suffice it to say: of the many attributes we may attribute to God, none is more basic—either in Jewish or in Christian understanding—than the claim that God is "holy", which is to say: God is "wholly-different", utterly set-apart, from anything we may have known and anyone we may have encountered. God, in short, is wonderfully—and terrifyingly—transcendent, residing in deepest mystery. More wondrous than our deepest thought, more eloquent than our finest words, infinitely better than our most noble deed. Whatever else we may wish to say of this, our God, at rock bottom we always begin, as the angels in Isaiah's vision began, by proclaiming God's holiness.

That's why it should not surprise us to discover the incomparable impact Isaiah's throne-room vision has made in the worship life of Jews and Christians alike. In what is known as the Amidah prayer (the great prayer of Benediction)—said daily by observant Jews—the first three blessings seek to locate the worshipper in the presence of God. And so the first blessing names God in the most precise of ways: as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. The second blessing goes a step further, in a sense naming God as Almighty, all-powerful and does so (as Christians this should bring a smile to our faces) by naming God as the One who raises the dead. But then—in what represents in many ways the climax of the prayer—worshippers name God as the Holy One, the One who alone is God. In the words of the prayer:

*We will hallow and adore You as the sweet words
of the assembly of the holy Seraphim
who thrice repeat "holy" unto You
as it is written by Your prophet.
And they call one to another and say:
"Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh:
Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of His glory."*

And yes, as you will also realize, Isaiah's imprint on Christian worship if no less marked: with one of the great moments in the Communion prayer inviting us to join with angels and archangels and all the created realm as together we invoke the prophet's words:

*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of His glory.*

My point is simply this. While the full scope of that which Isaiah **saw** may be lost to us...there can be no denying the extent to which that which Isaiah **heard** has reverberated: has reverberated across the aeons!

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Then again...then again...those solemn words...

"holy, holy, holy"

...those solemn words have played a part in the **Christian** sphere of faith that is unlike any part it has played within Judaism. As I have noted in the past—and as it is only fair to acknowledge in the present—there are not an overwhelming number of Biblical texts available to those who wish to provide ironclad scriptural proof of the Church's classic teaching about God, namely that the God of heaven and earth is Triune: Holy Trinity, God in three persons, **Blessed** Trinity. A handful of New Testament texts, side-by-side with an even smaller number of Old Testament texts are all we can bring to the table. That lends to the words overheard by the prophet an almost unique importance. *Holy! Holy! Holy!* To Jewish ears that denotes nothing more profound than an invitation to offer full-throated praise to God: not one cheer, not even two cheers, but a full-throated three cheers, fully-honouring the One to whom all praise is due.

By contrast, it is simply impossible for us—as Christians—**not** to hear in the thrice repeated invocation...

Holy! Holy! Holy!

...impossible for us not to hear a foreshadowing of the One we have come to know as Father, Son & Holy Spirit: in short, the God we worship as Trinity.

And I want to suggest...I want to suggest that the difference here between Jewish and Christian readings of Isaiah's sixth chapter points to an even more basic difference between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism, for its part, has always been wary of "theology": what we call God-talk. Only during the past 2 centuries have there been a proliferation of those who would be willing to regard themselves as Jewish-theologians; in previous generations that would have sounded like a highly presumptuous self-designation. Judaism, for the most part, was and still is content to regard God as Loving and Holy Mystery, in order to get on with the work of following the commandments given by God in the Torah, the five books of Moses. Much the same, by the way, can be said of Islam which for the most part is also content to regard God

as Loving and Holy Mystery, so that their adherents can get on with the work of following the way of life prescribed in the pages of the Q'uran. But from its earliest origins, Christians have found themselves wrestling: wrestling with questions that make it clear that we—as a faith community—have never been content to name God as Loving/Holy Mystery and to leave it at that. Christians—knowing full well that our words will always fall short of the mystery and magnificence of God have inevitably pressed on to grasp more fully (to penetrate more deeply) the “being” of the God we worship.

And it's important—at least once a year on this very Sunday—it is important to remind ourselves that we do so not because we are arrogant trespassers crossing boundaries frail and sinful human beings ought not to cross, neither because (as some historians of religion have argued) we permitted Greek philosophy to corrupt the Hebraic purity of the ancient church! No! Christian experience...

...by which I mean the experience handed down to us through the centuries from the first generation of disciples...

...Christian experience leaves us no choice but to probe more deeply into the very nature of this God we dare to worship. To insist—as Christians from the outset have insisted—that God was in Christ...and that, in Christ, God's own Word was made flesh....that core proclamation has left the Church no choice but to ask: who then is this God whose **own** Word became flesh in the flesh of Jesus the Messiah. In much the same way, to insist—as Christians from the outset have insisted—that the Spirit which descended upon the first witnesses as tongues of fire...that the Spirit that filled the hearts and animated the lips of those first Christian disciples on the day of Pentecost...was none other than God's **own** Spirit, has left the Church no choice but to ask: who then is this God who so lavishly fills the Church and fills creation with no second-tier spirit, but with God's Spirit! Who is this God? And yes: in fear and trembling, knowing that its language will never be equal to the Mystery we encounter in God: the Church has nevertheless dared to speak of God's thrice holiness: Holy Father...Source of all. Holy Son...Christ with us and for us. Holy Spirit...God's presence within and among us. Holy Trinity. Three-times holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

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As I bring this reflection to a close...it occurs to me that I have been busy naming—as the central characteristic of the God we worship here...

...it occurs to me that I have been busy naming, and yes celebrating, the “holiness” of our God. And please: don't misconstrue what I am about to say, when I now acknowledge the fact that God's holiness, when isolated from all of the other things we need to say about God, when shut-off from all of the other characteristics we need to name about God, can be a wee bit intimidating. Certainly Isaiah was intimidated when he stood in the Temple in the presence of the Holy One: acknowledging that he was an unclean person with unclean lips, in the midst of an unclean people with equally unclean lips. Perhaps some of you, having grown up in contexts where the Church emphasized

God's radical holiness to the exclusion of every other divine characteristic...perhaps you have struggled to get beyond a feeling of utter unworthiness on your own part, coupled with a feeling of remote distance—icy-cold alienation—from the One who fashioned this world and brought you into being. And maybe...just maybe...it's good to be reminded, from time to time, that the Holy God is not our buddy: that God truly **is** unlike anything we have known and anyone we have ever encountered. And yet! And yet! If that is all we know of God...something is radically out of place.

And I am reminded—reminded of what Swiss theologian Karl Barth does—when, in the pages of his massive theological magnum opus, he begins to ponder the characteristics of the God who came to us in Jesus. Solid Calvinist that he was, Barth had no choice but to place holiness at the very top of his list of the divine attributes, but he does so only after he first insists...only after he **first** insists...that it is not possible to speak of God's holiness unless we simultaneously speak of God's grace. For Barth—and I could not be a Christian if I was not in agreement with him on this—for Barth, God's holiness—the wholly-otherness of the God who came to us in Jesus—is the holiness of the God who is for us, never against us: except in those instances in which our self-destructive tendencies threaten to overwhelm us so thoroughly that God has no choice but to say **stop**. Know then, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the God of whom we sing—the God whose wonder and holiness we praise in this place—is the God whose holiness first and foremost and always denotes a holy love: a love so holy that we can neither earn it nor dissuade it from its love. A love so holy that it can only be received as a gift, which is why we call it grace. A love so potent and so radiant that even a glimpse would leave us blinded by its light: its “holy, holy, holy” light.

O God of eternal mystery! O God of unending grace! O God to whom the angels cry out in wonder and in praise. Holy God! Holy One! Holy Three! Bless and keep us this day! Set our hearts ablaze! And bring us safely home to the wonder and the glory and the goodness of your holy love.

Thanks be to God!

