

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California  
**The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 8, 2004**

**Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel**

Isaiah 6:1-8

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup> At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

<sup>5</sup> "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."

<sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

<sup>8</sup> 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!"\_(NIV)

**Who Will Go and Speak for Us?**

Imagine this: you have just been elected President of the United States. You need to find many people who will work with you on your staff. One of the important jobs you need to fill is Press Secretary. This is the person who will go out each day in front of TV cameras and reporters and speak for you. He or she will answer questions about what you are working on and give information that the whole world will be listening to. So you say to the people helping you find qualified Press Secretary candidates, "Here's what I'm looking for in a Press Secretary: someone with a long criminal record. Somebody with a rap sheet as long as my arm. Someone who has committed all kinds of crimes of dishonesty: lying, perjury, slander. If the person is in prison right now, even better! I will grant him a full pardon. I will call her to speak publicly for me."

Sound crazy? It would be. But did you know that God does something very similar to that? He does. He calls criminals to go out and speak for him. Who are these criminals? We are!

Today we look at a fascinating incident that took place in approximately 740 B.C. A man named Isaiah sees a vision of God in all his dazzling majesty. Through this vision, God makes Isaiah a press secretary of sorts. And this incident was written for us, too. God still calls people to go and speak for him. What kind of a person goes out and speaks for God? Someone who is sinful; someone who is saved; someone who is sent.

### Someone who is sinful

Listen to what Isaiah tells us: 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. We can't fathom this. To be able to catch a look at God himself, to see even just a little bit of his power and glory—I can't imagine what it would be like. But Isaiah knew. He saw, even if only briefly, the Lord.

The thing that Isaiah draws to our attention is how immensely powerful God is. He is "the Lord", the master of everything, from spinning galaxies to spinning subatomic particles. He is over all and through all and in all. In Isaiah's vision, he sees the Lord, appropriately, in the Temple, the main place of worship for God's Old Covenant people. The temple is where God chose to locate himself and meet with people, to speak to them, to bless them, to receive their prayers and offerings. Here God is appearing to Isaiah, appearing as the mightiest king there ever was. He is Lord and master, and to Isaiah he looks the part.

Isaiah quickly notices that he's not alone with the Lord. He sees some creatures called seraphs. We gather that these are holy angels—and not the cute, Cupid-like, little-chubby-naked-baby angels you sometimes see in pictures. These are blazing creatures with six wings: they fly with two, they reverently cover heads and feet with the other four. The seraphs are standing above the Lord, ready for a command, ready to do his bidding. As they wait, they are calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." When I hear this I imagine the most beautiful music ever heard—and some of the loudest! If you've ever had someone blasting a stereo in your house or maybe in a car outside your house, you know what this is like: At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook... In addition to the sound, God's transcendence and omnipresence are pictured for Isaiah to see and smell: ...the temple was filled with smoke.

Now comes Isaiah's reaction—this is something to pay close attention to. Notice what Isaiah does not say: "Hey God, it's about time I got an appointment with you! I have some comments—complaints, really—about how things have been going in the world. Plus, I have a list of a few things I need, so listen up." No! He says nothing of the sort. Instead, as he sees and feels God's all-consuming presence, filling his eyes and ears and rattling his bones, he says simply, "I am so dead." "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."

See, Isaiah realized something when he looked at the Lord. He realized that the Lord was holy. That means set apart—set apart from everything bad and wrong and imperfect. That's not how Isaiah was. The triune Lord was holy, holy, holy. Isaiah was unholy, unholy, unholy.

Simon Peter, the fisherman-turned-disciple, realized the same thing. We heard about it earlier (Luke 5:1-11). Jesus gave Peter a miraculously huge catch of fish. Peter realized that he was in the presence of God. He fell to his knees before Jesus and cried out, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

God wants us to realize is that this is an appropriate reaction when people step into the presence of God. We have no right to be near God, who is absolutely holy. Isaiah realized that, and so must we.

Yet strangely, Isaiah, this sinful man, is about to be called by God to be his spokesman. This “man of unclean lips”—someone who had, compared to God, a foul mouth—was going to be one of the greatest prophets ever.

I remember a time shortly after I had begun studying at the seminary. I had begun helping out at churches on Sunday mornings, conducting the liturgy and reading the Scripture lessons. I met one of my college professors, who asked me how things were going. I confessed that I wasn't so sure about this pastor stuff. I told him that as I stood at the altar, in between God and his congregation, I realized that I didn't belong there. Who was I, after all, to speak the words of God, to be his public spokesman? Do you know what my professor said in response? He said, “That's okay. In fact, if you *didn't* feel this way—that's when I'd be worried about you.”

Do you see what he meant? He meant that it is critical for all of us—pastors, teachers, Christians of all vocations—to realize that we are not worthy to speak to God or for God. But God nevertheless calls sinful people like you and me to share his words with the world.

### **Someone who is saved**

Back to Isaiah. Does the Lord kill him? Does God say, “Who is this foul-mouthed creature who dares to come into my holy presence? Who let him in here?” then *Zap!* and Isaiah is a pile of ash? No, God does not destroy him. Instead, something wonderful happens. 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.”

Isaiah knew that he was cut off from God. His sins kept him from relating to God as Father or Friend. And there was nothing Isaiah could do about it. God knew the same things. And—this is the best part—God took the initiative to do something about it. God sent an angel with a burning coal to touch Isaiah's sinful lips. What's the point of this? Well, think of the uses of fire. One thing that fire does is purify things. Fire burns away impurities, as when metal is refined. Intense heat kills germs, as when medical instruments are sterilized with hot steam in an autoclave. Fire purifies. So when the angel touches the glowing coal to Isaiah's lips, do you see what is happening? The Lord is purifying this sinful man. All the guiltiness Isaiah had by nature—God removed it from his record. All the things Isaiah had done and said—God covered over them.

Did you notice where the burning coal came from? From the altar. This is where animals were sacrificed. Blood was shed here. And all the blood that was shed in the temple pointed ahead to the blood of a person that would one day be shed—the blood of Jesus. What happened to Isaiah has happened to us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He let his blood be shed on a cruciform altar. He took the blame for our foul mouths and dirty thoughts and hateful actions. He took on himself our guiltiness and then gave us his righteousness to

us as a gift. His blood purifies us from every sin. And just as the angel delivered that purification to Isaiah, God delivers his pardon to us. He speaks his word of absolution to us. He washes us clean in holy baptism. He comes to us as he came to Isaiah. He gives us the body and blood of Jesus that were given for us, and we are forgiven. (That's why we sing the song of the seraphs, "Holy, holy, holy" just before we receive Holy Communion.)

We are sinful. But we have been saved from being separated from God. We are saved because God took the initiative and saved us by purifying us from every sin through the blood of his Son.

### **Someone who is sent**

After Isaiah's sin has been forgiven, he hears a voice. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" God is asking for volunteers, volunteers to go out and tell of his mercy and love.

Does anything about this strike you as strange? Think about it. There are angels standing all around the Lord, all of them holy, all of them just waiting to do whatever God tells them. But the Lord does not call on any of these to go out and speak for him. Instead, he turns to this man Isaiah, this man who was unclean and riddled with sin, this man who, only by grace, has escaped destruction! He transforms Isaiah with his love. The Lord turns him from a trembling sinner into an energized saint who says, "Here am I. Send me!"

This is how God works. He takes people who have experienced the terror of knowing their sinfulness, people who have experienced the amazing grace of God and his pronouncement of forgiveness—and he calls them to go out and speak for him. He takes lips that are sinful and unclean and purifies them so that they say, "Guess what happened to me? Someone loved me so much that he died for me. He died for you, too. And now he is alive. He wants to know you and give you gifts more valuable than you ever imagined."

Are you sinful? Then you have one of the qualifications for someone who speaks for the Lord. Are you saved? Jesus says that you are, for he died for you and rose from death and pronounces your guilt removed and your sin atoned for. If you are a Christian, you are already a spokesperson for God, and he wants you to talk about what he has done for you. He says to his disciples in every age, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).

This section of the Bible also leads us to think about something else: how God calls some people to speak publicly on his behalf, to speak publicly on behalf of other Christians. I'm talking about how God, through his church, calls people to be pastors and Christian teachers. Sometimes, I think, people get mistaken notions about where pastors and Christian teachers come from. They picture some secret laboratory where future ministers are bred in test tubes and then implanted with special Bible knowledge and skills of handshaking and public speaking, etc. Well, I'm exaggerating, but you see my point. In reality, Christian pastors and teachers are sinful people. They are regular, sinful people like everybody else. They are people who have been cleansed and forgiven by God, just as Isaiah was. They are regular Christians who simply love Jesus because

he loves them. They love him and see the importance of telling other people about his love.

That's why everyone today, especially kids and younger Christians, should think about preparing to be a pastor or a Christian teacher. All you need to be is a sinful person and a saved person, and that's what all of you are! And you more mature people who have taken different paths in life, it may not be too late to think about changing careers. If you feel it is, do you have kids and grandkids you could encourage to think about the public ministry?

The Lord is looking for press secretaries; he is looking for people to go out and speak for him. Are you sinful? Are you saved by Jesus? Are you willing to be sent? Then, with the love of Jesus burning in your heart, say, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!" Amen.