

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany ✠
February 5, 2007

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

"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. 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. ³ And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 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." 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. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

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!"

(Isaiah 6:1-8)

Excuse me, sir, ma'am, you don't belong here. Imagine your discomfort if one of our ushers tapped you on the shoulder before the service started and told you that you're simply out of place. You'll have to go. What would you say? How would you defend your right to stay here in this house of worship? Would you say, "But this is where I sit every week!"? Or perhaps, "But I'm a member! or "I'm just a visitor."

Or would you simply say, "You're right. I don't belong here and I don't deserve to be here, but that is exactly the reason I need to be here." If you've never thought about that, that's okay. But I suggest we spend some time with Isaiah and hear what he says when he finds himself in a place that he does not belong – the presence of a holy God. There he simply says, **Here am I, aware of my wretchedness, receiving forgiveness, and ready for service.**

Isaiah begins, **"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."** This is beginning of a vision that Isaiah saw in the year 740 B.C., **"the year that King Uzziah died."** King Uzziah died as a leper. Do you know he got leprosy? King Uzziah thought it would be a good idea to go into the temple, into the holy place (where only priests could go) and play priest for while and offer some incense. Well, after the priests rebuked him and he yelled at them, God afflicted Uzziah with leprosy until the day he died.

Isaiah knew better than that. He wouldn't have dared to enter into God's presence, in the temple or anywhere else, because he knew that God is holy and he was not. Isaiah probably knew that passage from Exodus where God said to Moses, **"You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."** But **"in the year King Uzziah died,"** Isaiah saw the Lord.

He knew he was out of place. And the vision he saw confirmed it. **"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.” Even the angels, who are in the presence of God every day – even they hide their face from the Almighty God, who, as they said, is **“Holy, Holy, Holy.”** The word holy means that God is set apart. He is set apart by his being and by his actions which are always pure and just. God is completely different than angels, and certainly different than sinful human beings like Isaiah.

All of these things led Isaiah to this one conclusion: **“Woe to me!’ ... ‘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.”**

Isaiah knew, above all else, that he did not belong here in the presence of God. He was completely aware of his wretchedness. He was aware that he did not belong in God’s presence, not for a second, and that he fully deserved to die for laying eyes on the Lord Almighty.

But remember that this was a vision – from God. Isaiah knew better than to just march into the temple. He knew that he could never see God face to face. Now why would God have given him this vision, except to lead Isaiah to come to the unmistakable conclusion that he was out of place with God. His sin caused it. And God wanted him to be aware of it.

I suspect that if God were to give any one of us a vision like he gave to Isaiah, we too would be crying for help and pleading for mercy. We would cry **“Woe to me! I’m ruined!”** because we would be. God hasn’t given us a vision, but he has given us something that ought to make us shake just as much. God in his Word threatens to punish all who sin. **The soul that sins is the one who will die. The wages of sin is death. Your sins have separated you from your God.** God’s law preaches to us a law that we don’t keep, that we *can’t* keep and then it declares that we’re doomed, ruined because we can’t. It leads us all to one unmistakable conclusion: we don’t belong here. We don’t belong in the presence of God, whether that’s here in his house of worship or his house in heaven. We don’t belong in his presence.

And yet we are. Here we are and we stood up at the beginning of this service and heard these outrageous words, “God invites us to come into his presence.” What? No! It can’t be! I don’t belong here. Not after the things I’ve done. Not after the things these unclean lips have said. It can’t be!

But it’s true: “God invites us to come into his presence and worship him with humble and penitent hearts.” God doesn’t invite us here to destroy us. He invites us into his presence (even to hear the law and its serious consequences) so that we might be aware of our wretchedness, so that we might actually stand here in God’s presence and simply say to him, “Here am I. I confess that I am by nature sinful, and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good. For this I deserve your punishment both now and in eternity. Here I am Lord, have mercy on me.”

“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.’”

At this point I can just imagine Isaiah having these two thoughts. Or at least, this is what I would be thinking. First, what a relief. My sins have been taken away. And not just any sins – the very sins I just confessed, the very sins that have been weighing on my heart and soul – the sins that I thought would separate me from God forever. The coal touched my sinful, unclean lips, and has taken away my guilt. What a relief!

And the second thought: how strange! How odd that the angel should come to me and touch my lips with a live coal to forgive me.

But if I think back to the book of Leviticus, where God explains what took place on the great Day of Atonement, perhaps I'll understand a little better. Perhaps you remember that in the Old Testament God dwelt in the Most Holy Place – that inner room of the temple or tabernacle. That's where the ark of the covenant was. And only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter into the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the sins of the people. But because the priest himself was sinful, he would first have to offer a sacrifice for his own sins, and then he would take a censer full of burning coals from the altar in the holy place, and put incense onto the coals, and it would make so much smoke that would conceal the ark of the covenant, so that he would not die. You see, the smoke from the coals covered the sin of the priest.

So what is God saying? I know you don't belong in my presence. By right I ought to destroy you for your sin and rebellion. But I will not destroy you. Instead, I will come to you and do what is necessary to take away your sin.

So here we are. Though we don't deserve to come into God's presence he invites us and look!, he comes to us and announces to us, "Through the blood of Jesus, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

What a relief! The very sin he comes to take away are the sins we confessed. The sins he forgives are the sins that trouble us and oppress us and lead us to fear and tremble before God.

But how strange! He comes to us, not with angels and burning coals but with his words (of absolution) addressed to our ears. He comes to us with water applied to the forehead. He comes to us in bread and wine to place in our mouth. How strange! But he comes (even in these strange things) with his promise: your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.

So here we are, standing before God, simply receiving the forgiveness he gives. But we're not ready to go yet. There's something more. "**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!'**"

Here's the catch, right? There's always a catch. God gives Isaiah this vision, shakes him up, calms him down, all so that he can get him to do something. It must have all been a ploy to get Isaiah to work for him, right?

But did you notice something? God didn't tell Isaiah to do anything. God just asks a question, "**Whom shall I send?**" God simply throws the question out there, assuming that someone will be willing to go. And he doesn't say where or to do what – no specifics – just go. Who's going to go? Maybe one of the angels will go. They certainly would be up to the task and get the job done.

But it's not an angel who speaks. It's Isaiah, and what he says is simply astounding. "Here am I." He's no longer afraid to stand before God and even has the nerve to speak directly to the Almighty "**Here am I. Send me.**" He wants God to send him, but he couldn't have said a word if his sin had not truly been forgiven. God knows that those who have been forgiven now have the desire to serve the one who has freed them sin and death.

Here we are. Can you hear his question, "**Who will go for us? Whom shall I send?**" He's not very specific. He's not specifically asking for a missionary to Africa, or even a volunteer to pass out flyers in the neighborhood. He's not asking for each of us to drop what we're doing and enroll in school for full-time church work. No, he simply waits for a response. He's waiting for a *grateful* response to his full and free forgiveness. He's waiting for us to say, "**Here am I. Send**

me.” Send me wherever you want me to go. Shall I go to work? I’ll be your ambassador there. Or maybe I’ll be your spokesman at school, or at home. Maybe I *can* serve you here at church. Or maybe I can actually consider using my life for full-time service and represent you in a pulpit or a classroom someday.” The opportunities are endless, but the answer is really the same – for all who stand in the presence of God, grateful for his forgiveness: Here am I. Send me.

Why are you here? Not, why did you decide to come to church today, but why are you here? What is it that allows you to stand before God – a holy God? What can we say? Not much, except what the prophet Isaiah says, “Here am I. I’m deeply aware of my wretchedness and sin. I know I don’t belong in God’s presence. But here am I, here to receive forgiveness for my sin and the absolution of my guilt in Word and Sacrament. And here am I – profoundly grateful for that forgiveness and ready to serve in whatever capacity I possibly can.” What else can we possibly say as we stand before God – here in worship, in our everyday lives, and someday before God’s throne in heaven? What else, but, “Here am I. Send me.” Amen.