

When Holiness Comes Our Way
Isaiah 6:1-13 Communion Homily
“Snowmageddon” February 7, 2010

Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Psalms 141:2

For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. Malachi 1:11

And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. Revelation 5:8

Isaiah went to worship in the temple. It was just another worship service. The priests filled with sanctuary with the sweet smell of incense, something like we smell today coming from our altar, but multiply it by a thousand, because the priest would send it forth in big censers that they would swing and the whole room would look like it was filled with smoke. It was like an ancient Glade air freshener, and it reminded people that they were in a holy place, a place that didn't even smell like their shops and houses and barns. Practically speaking, the smoke covered the overwhelming odor of the people and it helped them worship God with their noses.

It was most likely the Enthronement Celebration which Isaiah attended, which is referred to in Psalm 47 and 93. This celebration was an annual event that reminded the people that the Divine King would return to his temple as a victor over the forces of evil to be crowned as king, creator and judge over his people. It was just another annual celebration, but this year felt different, because their earthly king, King Uzziah, was dead. Uzziah had been king for 52 years, the only king that most of the people of Israel had ever known. And most of those years were filled with prosperity, safety, and peace. Peace, even though the enemy nations around them got stronger and stronger. Peace, even though the other half of the divided kingdom had already fallen, been overrun.

So, now what would happen? Everybody had a sense of it, but were afraid to whisper it. They knew that the future looked grim in many ways. The golden days had passed. The dark days had come. There was an age of anxiety, uncertainty- everybody felt it. Isaiah felt it. And Isaiah brought those fears and those nightmares and those hopes and dreams with him into worship. And God was there to meet him. And Frederick Buechner, in his book *Peculiar Treasures*, describes the scene as something like this...

There were banks of candles flickering in the distance and clouds of incense thickening the air with holiness, and stinging his eyes, and high above him, as if it had always been there but was only now seen for what it was (like a face in the leaves of a tree or a bear among the stars), there was the Mystery itself whose gown was the incense and the candles a dusting of gold at the hem. There were winged creatures shouting back and forth the way excited children shout to each other when dusk calls them home, and the whole vast, reeking place started to shake beneath his feet like a wagon going over cobbles, and he cried out, "O God, I am done for! I am foul of mouth and the member of a foul-mouthed race. With my own two eyes I have seen him. I'm a goner and sunk." Then one of the winged things touched his mouth with fire and said, "There, it will be all right now," and the Mystery itself said, "Who will it be?" and with charred lips he said, "Me," and Mystery said, "Go."

Mystery said, "Go give the deaf Hell till you're blue in the face and go show the blind Heaven till you drop in your tracks because they'd sooner eat ground glass than swallow the bitter pill that puts roses in the cheeks and a gleam in the eye. Go do it."

Isaiah said, "Do it till when?"

Mystery said, "Till Hell freezes over."

Mystery said, "Do it till the cows come home."

And that is what a prophet does for a living and, starting from the year that King Uzziah died when he saw and heard all these things, Isaiah went and did it.

This passage is known as the commissioning of Isaiah. This experience in worship launched his prophet career. The passage is about holiness, sinfulness, and a grace that burns like a hot coal and grows like a seed.

Holiness- something that is set apart, separate, not of this world. I could describe what holiness means further, but why should I when many of you already know what holiness looks like. Take a moment to remember and to share that memory with one another. Remember a time when you felt God especially close in your life, maybe it was a person who impressed with the way they spoke and acted and lived, the loving, kind

words they used, the forgiveness they offered, the sense of peace that poured out of them. Maybe it was a special place or special event in your life when you knew, really know that God was with you right then at that moment. Turn to a neighbor and each of you, in about 2 minutes, briefly share your story of a holy moment or a holy person. I'll time you and let you know when to switch. Go to it...

Remember that experience of holiness in your life? How did you respond to it back then at that moment? For most of us, like Isaiah, when we are confronted by something that is holy we immediately remember we are not. We know that something needs to change in us; we want to be more like them, more like that. That something that needs to change is our own sinfulness. We're just not right, none of us. The way Isaiah put it is we are a people with dirty lips, part of the problem, living among a whole nation, a whole globe filled with people who dishonor God with the things we say and the things we do. If we keep going this way we are going to ruin one another and ruin ourselves.

That's what Isaiah was facing. He knew the future looked absolutely bleak, much like our future today. A world in transition where there are no rules that we all share and no authority that is recognized, a world where everybody does pretty much what they want to do, where selfishness reigns. A world where the wars would just keep on coming, the bombs would get stronger and dirtier, and the poor in every land would do nothing but suffer until their throats were sore from screaming.

"Woe is me. I am ruined, because I know we can do better than this. I have seen the Almighty, our Maker, and God has made us all for more, far more..."

When holiness comes our way our sinfulness becomes more evident. And that is when God can work with us. That is when grace becomes a gift not only that we are willing to receive but that we will cherish.

To Isaiah, God said, "I've touched you. I'll change those lips of yours. Leave your guilt here with me. Don't carry it back out of the temple with you. Your sin, I have made atonement for. I have set you free from it." To the nation, all those people not in the temple that day, God sent a message: "For those of you with callous hearts who don't care about anybody or anything, for those of you whose ears and eyes are dull, who don't even recognize that the one and only God Almighty exists, terrible pain is coming for you. It is inevitable of you live apart from me. Nations will be ruined, cities overrun, fields burned and salted, your life will fall like a great oak tree that is sawed at the base and tumbles over with a mighty thud.

But your life will not be over. Your story will not be ended. Even though your life is cut down to a stump of what it was before, a holy seed will grow in that stump."

As we share the bread and the cup today, remember, God is here. Where 2 or more are gathered in my name there will I be- that is what our Lord promised. Our eyes are open when we share the bread and cup and we remember Jesus and his great sacrifice for us and we are re-membered, re-knit, as the Body of Christ. And today one of two things will happen in this sanctuary filled with prayers rising up like incense before our Lord. Some of us will be commissioned. We'll experience the holiness of Christ once again deep in every fiber of who we are as we eat and drink and pray and sing. And out of gratitude for this great gift we'll want to share holy moments with our friends and relatives, associates and neighbors in a fresh, new way. And we'll live this week in a way that makes us a holy presence in a hellish world, and some may return to be saved because of the moments we share with them. Or, perhaps, some of us here will lay down our burdened, ruined lives, our problems and our troubles, our anxieties and our nightmares, lives that have been beaten down and stripped away by broken homes and broken jobs and broken neighborhoods, by bad decisions on our part and bad circumstances all around us. If you come here today feeling like you have been overwhelmed by life and you have been cut to the very core, remember that a seed is still growing there at your very core, a seed of holiness that responds to the grace of God and will grow into a new life for you, if you water it and nurture it and care for it. You have a future coming, God can work wonders with the stump of what is left of you.

God's grace is here today. Holiness is passing our way. Breathe it in. Eat it up, Drink it down. And walk away changed. Amen.