
Holy, Holy, Holy: Taste and See

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Epiphany 5 – Year C

In the year that King Uzziah died, the prophet Isaiah came to life. He began his human public ministry in a divine vision. He grew up. Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and sitting on a throne, and his robe filled the temple.

So great was the Lord's presence that the angels surrounding him—these seraphs—covered their faces and their feet. They dared not gaze upon the Lord's majesty, nor did they dare to step upon such holy ground. This image of angels being unable to cast their eyes upon God, even angels not gazing upon God—gives us a sense of how God exists so far beyond our comprehension. God is beyond comprehension.

But the angels were saying something. In fact, the angels were singing. They were singing a chorus that has existed forever, from before time and forever. It is a chorus that we try to sing, too, every week, “Qados, Qados, Qados. “Hagios, Hagios, Hagios.” “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus.” Holy, Holy, Holy. We chant it every week at this altar.

Every culture and tradition has a different name for it. Holy, Holy, Holy. Many of us have various definitions for “holy,” too. Does it mean miraculously pure? Does it mean without sin? Does it mean saved? Does it mean off-limits? Does it mean “so heavenly perfect that we are no earthly good?”

I propose a relatively simple definition of “holy,” a meaning that we can understand from this passage alone, Isaiah chapter six. Holiness means “the presence of God.” To be holy is to practice the presence of God. To be holy is to acknowledge the presence of God. To be holy is to make room for God. To be holy is to grow in God.

The angels were singing “Holy, holy, holy” because they knew and rejoiced that they were in the presence of God.

Now, the presence of God has consequences. God is glory and light, yes. God is beauty and love, oh yes! But God is also truth. The presence of God is also truth.

The first truth that God's presence usually delivers is the truth about us. When we are in the presence of God, we don't always learn something immediately about God. But we usually learn something immediately about ourselves.

We learn, for instance, how small we are. We learn how limited we are. We realize the things we have done. God's presence casts light upon our lives. If God is light, yes, then that light will inevitably illumine things. God's light will illumine things we might wish were left alone in the dark.

So it was with Isaiah. When faced with God's great presence. When encountering holiness, the first thing Isaiah cries out is “Woe is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

What does it mean to be a man of unclean lips? What does it mean to live among a people of unclean lips? It means to be a person who speaks as if God is not present. To be unclean is to live and speak and act as if God is not present. Unclean lips forget God. Unclean lips cast curses and speak violence. Unclean lips speak before God speaks; they speak instead of God.

Clean lips speak later. Clean lips wait for the touch of God.

So it was with Isaiah. Woe is me, he cried out, realizing that he was a man of unclean lips. But then one of the angels took a live coal from the altar. (You can see it right over there, in the front stained glass window along the Peachtree Road wall!) One of the angels took a piece of divine light from the altar of light. One of the angels took this illumination, this coal of fire, and touched Isaiah's lips with it.

That angelic touch might not have felt very pleasant. Sometimes the touch of God is not soft and sweet, but hot and fiery. Yes, God is light! But God is also fire.

I love it when children come to the altar rail for communion. In fact, I love that time in our service, after we have sung, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" when anyone comes to communion. I am not sure anyone has realized it yet, but children have a lot in common with adults. Some come to the altar rail eagerly and devoutly. But some children have to be coerced into coming. Some children come to communion with lovely smiles. But some adults—I mean children—come with scowls. Some come in joy; some in sorrow.

Some come confidently, knowing exactly what is going on. Some have no idea what communion means. I mean children and adults both. There is no difference before the altar of God.

Compared to the majesty and holiness of God, children and adults alike are small and limited. Neither children nor adults fully comprehend the glory of God. Seeing, we do not see. Hearing, we do not hear. But we approach the altar because we choose to grow in God.

Adults sometimes inform me that children should wait to receive communion, the bread and wine, until they have some sense, some comprehension, some ability to understand what is going on. Really? I answer. Until they can explain, or understand, what is going on? Tell me, Mr. or Mrs. Informed Adult, can you yourself adequately explain what is going on?

Holy, Holy, Holy. None of us completely comprehends Holy Communion. Just as none of us understands what is going on when we are in the presence of God. The mystical presence of God means that seeing, we do not see. Hearing, we do not hear. We only taste; we only taste and see.

Yes, we come forward so that something holy can touch our lips. The bread of heaven, the cup of salvation, touches our lips.

We learn, in this practice, to make room for God. We learn to practice the presence of God. Becoming holy takes time. It takes practice. It means learning to wait for God to speak before we speak.

So it was with Isaiah. His lips were touched by the angel. Then God did speak.

"Whom shall I send?" "And who will go for us?"

God does not touch us only for our own sakes. We think that's the reason. In our limited capacities, we think God touches us so that we might be cleansed, so that we might know God, so that we might be helped, so that we might be saved.

But the vision that God gave Isaiah was not meant for Isaiah alone. When the burning fire touched Isaiah's unclean lips, that cleansing was not meant for Isaiah alone. When Isaiah's guilt was removed from him, that was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of the story. It was the beginning of growth.

"Whom shall I send" the voice of the Lord thundered. "And who will go for us?"

"Holy, Holy, Holy" are not words that the people of God are meant to keep to themselves. We are meant to grow up with them. The real proof of holiness is how Isaiah answered. Isaiah proves that he knew the holiness of God by leaping at the answer. He grew up.

Holy, Holy, Holy. Here I am, Here I am, Here I am. Send me.

AMEN.

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