

Advent 2011 Part 4

More Than A Holy Night

This is the final Sunday of Advent. Next Sunday is Christmas and we will celebrate the birth of our Savior but this morning I want us to linger again in anticipation of his advent. Allow me to set the stage this morning for the miracle that is Christmas and the Incarnation. Look with me at a passage of Scripture found in Hebrews 11. The writer speaks of the men and women of old, those faithful ones who “through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice...shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames...were stoned...sawed in two...put to death by the sword...destitute, persecuted, mistreated...” Among those mentioned in Hebrews 11 were the prophets. The writer said, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” Earlier in the passage the writer of Hebrews declared, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.”

What “had been promised” was referring to the coming of the Messiah, the Savior. The promise was one of redemption and salvation for all of us. The prophets spoke of that day, they knew it was coming, someday, but they saw it only by faith, welcoming those things from a distance. And when you think about the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah, you can't help but think of the words of Isaiah. **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.”** Isaiah 7:14 **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** Isaiah 9:6. **“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him...”** Isaiah 11:1. **“You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout...say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Sovereign Lord comes.. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young.”** Isaiah 40:9-11 **“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are**

healed.” Isaiah 53:5

There are so many more passages we could read from Isaiah but time prohibits. Imagine as he spoke those words with such detail concerning the Messiah’s birth, his nature, his ministry, his death and resurrection, and yet Isaiah never saw him. He saw all of this from a far and by faith. He spoke of the virgin conceiving a child, but would he recognize Mary and her son? I wonder what he would think if he looked down from the battlements of heaven and gazed upon that scene in Bethlehem. God in flesh appearing, the Holy One of Israel wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. I can’t help but think he might be confused by it all. Overwhelmed.

Let me show you something that I believe can help us understand what Isaiah might have felt if he was allowed that glimpse of the nativity. Turn with me to Isaiah 6. Isaiah tells us that **“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.”** Approximately 740 bc the nation mourned the loss of their king. Perhaps Isaiah had gone to the temple to mourn and seek the consolation and comfort of the Lord when he had this vision, this encounter with God.

Isaiah saw the Lord, the Sovereign. His account gives us an image of royalty and majesty. The Lord is not described, but he is seated upon a throne - a place and position of power and authority. He is high and exalted. By his nature he is above everything and everyone. He is transcendent above all. All of creation exalts and lifts him up. Notice the train of his robe filled the temple. This speaks of His glory, his majesty, his radiant and manifest presence that reaches from the throne of heaven and touches us here on earth in his temple.

Notice something in your bible. **Lord - LORD** In verse one the word Lord is printed with a capital L and then with lower case letters following. Verse 3 prints LORD in all caps. These are not the same words. Lord is the translation of the word Adonai. Think of it as God’s title. He is Lord of all creation, God, the Almighty One, the Sovereign and king over all. LORD is the translation of God’s name that the Israelites regarded as so holy that they did not write or speak it for fear of profaning his name. Scholars call it the tetragrammaton and translate it YHWH. It was protected from profanity because no one spoke his name and over time, know one even knew for sure how to pronounce it. We pronounce it Yahweh at times, but when you see LORD in all caps in the Scripture, it refers to this holy and sacred name of God. It is a reminder of how holy he is and the reverence ascribed by the Jewish people, even today.

Isaiah saw the Lord. We know from what God told Moses in Exodus 33 “you cannot see my face for no one may see me and live.” Exodus 33:20. Remember God caused his glory to pass before Moses but he hid him in the cleft of a rock so that Moses would only see the back side of God’s presence.

It is our desire to see him and someday, the bible says we will see him “as he is.” Right now it is not so much an eye problem as it is a heart problem. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” When we are finally pure and complete in him we will see him as he is.

We understand that folks like us are not allowed to see God, to gaze upon his glory, but notice in verse 2. It says, **“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.”**

Seraphs (seraphim is plural) were angelic creatures. The word literally means “burning ones” (perhaps referring to them as beings of light or fire). Sinful men cannot look upon God, but here are these holy angels, sinless and pure as they are, these seraphim who dwell eternally in the presence of God, covered their face so as not to gaze directly into the face of God because he is so holy. These angelic beings felt unworthy before his holy presence.

They had another pair of wings to cover their feet. We talk about people with feet of clay – it’s because our feet link us to the earth from whence we came. We are humble clay made alive by the Spirit of God. The Seraphim are not earthly like us, their feet are not made of clay, yet these creatures too covered their feet with one set of their wings, acknowledging their creatureliness in the presence of God.

Notice verse 3 declares, **“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”** Repetition is a form of emphasis used in Hebrew literature. Like Jesus saying “verily, verily” or “truly, truly”. It means “with great emphasis.” But to repeat something three times gives it super emphasis. One respected bible scholar suggested “Holiness is supremely the truth about God and his holiness is in itself so far beyond human thought that a ‘super-superlative’ has to be invented to express it.” (J. Alec Motyer)

There is only one characteristic of God in Scripture that is elevated to this third degree. The bible doesn’t say God is “love, love, love”, or “mercy, mercy, mercy”, but it says God is holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is full of his glory! Isaiah and the Seraphim are declaring that

God's glory, his presence, his holiness cannot be contained in one place. It is too much. A superlative has to be invented to give it expression. It spills out and over all of creation.

Get it in your mind, how holy God is. We can find an even more detailed description of the throne of God and his holy presence in Revelation. It confirms what Isaiah is seeing. And while these fiery beings are flying around the throne of God, covering their face and their feet and declaring the holiness of God, here stands Isaiah, enraptured by the vision he is allowed to see.

Isaiah tells us the doorposts and thresholds began to shake. Like an earth quake, the whole place trembled in the awesome presence of God and the temple was filled with smoke. The foundation of the temple wasn't the only thing shaking. Isaiah is shaken to the core of his being and cries out, **“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.”**

Woe is a word we don't use much anymore. There is a Yiddish expression, “Oy vay”, which is kind of an “oh, woe is me”. But understand what is happening when Isaiah says “woe to me.” When a prophet proclaimed a message it was as an oracle of God. Positive words began with “blessed”, like Jesus' sermon on the mount, but an announcement of judgment and doom began with “woe”. Woe to Sodom and Gomorrah. Woe to the nations of the earth. Judgement came with uttering the word “woe.”

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he recognized his own condition, the depths of his own unholiness and pronounced woe - doom and judgment upon himself. “Woe to me.” “I am ruined”. King James translates it as “I am undone.” It means he felt he was falling apart, being destroyed, but the Hebrew word also carries with it the idea of silence - like the silence that comes after disaster or death. He was undone, silenced, because he recognized he could not enter in and participate in what was happening in this vision. He was unclean, unholy.

Isaiah was a man of integrity, maybe the most righteous guy in the country. A spokesman for God. Yet one glimpse of God in his holiness and majesty and Isaiah was undone, ruined, silenced and excluded. As long as he was simply comparing himself to the men and women around him, he was pretty holy, but before God's holiness, it was all over. His sense of integrity and morality was gone. He was naked before God, silenced, a sinner without grounds for mercy, deserving only justice and punishment.

This overwhelming recognition of Isaiah's sinfulness occurred all at once. We can't really appreciate this unless you can remember vividly the conviction you felt as God dealt with you about your sinfulness. There was no place to hide. Your life is laid bare, exposed by the Holy gaze of Almighty God. Isaiah was in anguish, guilty with no way to escape when suddenly one of the Seraphim flew to him with a burning coal and touched it to his lips. It was a severe mercy, but mercy nonetheless. The angel said, "Your iniquity, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for. You are forgiven."

This coal was taken from the altar, the place where God "accepted and was satisfied by the blood of sacrifice." (Motyer) This burning coal represents the atonement for sins that God provides and the forgiveness and cleansing that we so desperately need. In one symbolic act this coal from the altar represents salvation for Isaiah and for us all. Forgiveness. Atonement. Cleansing. Both the outer man and the inner man are changed by God's redeeming grace. His lips and mouth are touched by that coal, changing Isaiah on the outside, but his guilt is taken away and his sins are atoned for, changing him on the inside.

Isaiah saw it, felt it, experienced it – that deep remorse and sorrow for his sins – the desperate desire for cleansing and forgiveness. He saw himself and knew himself as he really was, for the first time, by seeing God in his holiness and his glory. Broken. Undone. Unnerved. Ruined. But now redeemed. Restored. Made whole by God's holy mercy and grace.

What does any of this have to do with Christmas and Advent? Here with stand along side Isaiah. We see the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe fills the temple. We see him in his holiness and we are overwhelmed by the majesty, the splendor of his presence. We are undone, silenced by his holiness, unable to speak his name. Like the Seraphim we cover our eyes and our face because his radiant splendor, his holiness is too bright for us in our unholy condition. We join with the Serpahim in worship declaring "**Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.**" Everything around us begins to tremble and shake. His glory is thick and overpowering. Under the weight of his awesome presence we fall before him. We are humbled by His Majesty. He is indeed too wonderful for words. Like Isaiah we are undone. We recognize there is nothing good in us compared to this Holy, exalted God! We acknowledge our own wickedness and that we are worthy only of judgment. In our brokenness we cry with Isaiah, "woe to me."

I get this picture of God upon his throne and me blinded by his glory and humbled and broken at his feet. I understand that. I get that someone like me should never be able to look upon him in his holiness, but here's the part I don't understand: **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** John 1:14

I understand not being able to stand in his presence, undone by his holiness, but here is what I can't comprehend: **"An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."** Luke 2:9-12

Why would a God who is so holy that even the angels don't gaze upon him, whose name we cannot even speak, whose presence causes us to literally fall apart, why would that God become a man and be born in a stable, lie in a feeding trough, subject himself to all the ridicule, scorn, pain and agony of life here and finally die on a cross for the likes of me? That's what I can't understand.

I was reminded this week of just how real and how humble those circumstances were at his birth. A friend emailed me a message saying, "we doctored and weighed some cattle today...cold, mud and other cow surprises everywhere. Made me wonder again about why the God of the universe chose to treat those lowly, tired and lonely shepherds with such honor and respect in personally dispatching angels to introduce them to the Savior of the world? My, how he must love us!"

The God of heaven as a baby in a feeding trough, in the cold and the mud and the cow surprises. God among us. Frederick Buechner wrote, "The Word became flesh. Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed. Incarnation. It is not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light. Agonized laboring led to it, vast upheavals of intergalactic space, time split apart, a wrenching and tearing of the very sinews of reality itself. You can only cover your eyes and shudder before it, before this 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God...who for us and for our salvation', as the Nicene Creed puts it, 'came down from heaven.' Came down.

Only then do we dare uncover our eyes and see what we can see. It is the Resurrection and the Life she holds in her arms.”

Isaiah saw from a veiled distance what we have been invited to see up close and personal. This Holy One upon whom we dare not gaze now is among us, cradled by the virgin, adored by the shepherds. All of this because of His great love for us... “for us and for our salvation, [He] came down from heaven.”

I thought this week about those who doubt the story of Christ and of his birth, his death and resurrection, or even worse, those who believe it but disregard it and ignore it. If there is even one possibility that this story is true, that this holy God became flesh and dwelt among us in order to save us, how can we not give our selves, our lives, our all to him. For us and for our salvation. That’s why he came on that Holy night. No wonder the song writer said, “fall on your knees, oh hear the angel voices, O night divine.”