

Sermon: The Vision Isaiah 6:1-13

A few centuries after Christ was born, the church had to make a decision on the annual date to celebrate the birth of Christ.

And the church made the decision to celebrate his birth near the time of the winter solstice.

Winter solstice is that time of the year when there is the least amount of daylight.

Clearly this communicates that Christ came into the world as a light in the darkness.

Over the years, Christmas has become associated with God's tidings of comfort and joy.

This is right and good. Christ indeed came to bring comfort and joy.

So delighted are we in the comforts and joys of Christmas, that we extend them to the weeks before Christmas begins.

And the celebration continues for weeks after.

The comforts and joys of Christmas are not just spiritual.

Our broader culture joins in, by focusing on the warmth of friendship and family.

Christmas season is a cozy time filled with hearty foods, festive gatherings and gift giving.

Cozy, joyous, feeling at home, comfortable- this is how we like to celebrate Christ's coming into the world.

This morning we are going to study a passage that is the exact opposite of all of that.

In Isaiah 6, God doesn't come to be in man's presence.

Rather a Isaiah finds himself in God's presence.

And as we will see, God's presence was anything but comfortable.

As a matter of fact, **comfortable** is probably the last word Isaiah would have used to describe this meeting.

For he was awestruck, terrified, and more disturbed by this meeting than he had ever been in his entire life.

Isaiah 6 is an appropriate study during advent because it helps us appreciate God's approachability in Jesus Christ.

In Christ, God is approachable because he set aside his full glory and became like one of us.

In Isaiah 6, God is anything but approachable.

In short, Isaiah 6 helps us to understand the greatness of Christ's condescension.

And it shows us what God must do to fit us for His presence.

So let us read Isaiah 6:1-13:

Isaiah 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2** Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. **3** And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. **5** And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with

tongs from the altar. **7** And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." **9** And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive."

10 Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes;

lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears,

and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"

And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant,

and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste,

12 and the LORD removes people far away,

and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

13 And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again,

like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled."

The holy seed is its stump.

This is God's holy and perfect word.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

Have you ever experienced the presence of God?

Sometimes we talk about the calming presence of God we feel when we take a walk in the forest and see his creation.

Or we may experience his nearness when we read our bibles in a time of trial and recognize that he is all that we need.

We might experience God's presence when he provides for us in an unexpected and needed way.

All of these experiences of God may very well be genuine.

Yet there is one type of experience of God that rises above them all.

And this is knowing God in his majestic holiness.

Isaiah had this type of experience and he was never the same afterward.

And my hope for all of us is that we would know God in such a powerful way that we would never be the same.

You have a sermon outline and the first point there is...

I. The End of an Era (1a)

Isaiah begins this chapter by telling us about the time he saw the Lord.

It was in the year that King Uzziah died.

2 Chronicles 26 and 2 Kings 15 tell us about the reign of king **Uzziah** or **Azariah** as he is known in Kings.

Uzziah or Azariah was a good king over Judah.

He was far from perfect, but still, he was good.

He reigned for 52 years and was known for being a stable administrator.

For those who have experienced upheaval and tumult, a steady hand is greatly appreciated.

And so, King Uzziah's death marked the end of an era. And so the question arises, what will Judah's future be like?

Sadly, at this point in Isaiah, we already know. Chapters 1-5 promise judgment and destruction with grace to come in the end. As I said last week, things will get worse before they get better.

And so Isaiah's time stamp of the year of King Uzziah's death is no minor fact. It is the end of an era. Uzziah is no longer king. Yet the Lord is seated on his throne as he has always been. His rule is forever.

Now, Isaiah would have said he understood this before this great experience. We can assume that Isaiah was a worshipper of God. He knew God and sought to follow his commandments.

Yet, Isaiah did not know God as he ought. And none of us do really. If you are visiting today or are unsure of where you stand with God, I want to give you some inside information.

Many of us have been coming to church for years. We've been Christians for some time. And yet, the longer we follow Christ, the more we find ourselves baffled by how little we really know him. Because knowing God is an inexhaustible pursuit.

I believe the vastness of space is the only thing to which I can compare the knowledge of him. You could travel for a thousand years at light speed around our galaxy and still, you have barely just begun.

This is what it's like to begin knowing God. There is so much about him to be known- he is past finding out. The most experienced and devout among us has barely just begun. And this is why heaven will never get boring. God is eternally interesting.

And so in a sense, we are all like Isaiah. We may know about God. But we need a deeper understanding of him. And God, decided to reveal himself to Isaiah.

And this leads us to our next point:

II. Isaiah Sees the Lord (1-5)

1 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

The backdrop of Isaiah's vision is in the temple, presumably on earth. The Lord is seated in an exalted state. The train, that is, the skirt or hem of his robe fills the temple..

And yet the Lord is not alone. There are other beings present called seraphim.

2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Their number is not given. In John's vision in Revelation 5:11, there are myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. This means their number is beyond counting. The Seraphim are probably most literally to be thought of as 'fiery beings'. That's what their name literally means. They are not fat babies with delicate wings. They are immense creatures blazing with the reflected glory of God.

3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

This is the only time in all of scripture that the Lord is referred to with 3 repeated adjectives. The emphasis here could be no greater.

God is Holy, Holy, Holy.

It's as if the Lord wants Isaiah to know that of all the qualities the Lord has, his sovereignty, his love, his justice, his might- of all of them, there is an overarching quality about him that informs all of his other qualities. And that is His holiness.

To be holy doesn't mean primarily to be morally pure. It doesn't deal with ethics first and foremost. It means, first of all, to be set apart. To be other than. To be sacred or sanctified.

For instance, the neighbouring nations had as their gods Baal and Asherah. And the religious prostitutes of Baal and Asherah were counted as holy. These prostitutes were holy unto their gods.

And so, in this religious context of 735 BC or thereabout, there Seraphim are telling Isaiah that the Lord is Holy, Holy, Holy. Which means He is like no other. He is absolutely and utterly incomparable.

The seraphim are telling Isaiah that the Lord is not like the other gods, not like Isaiah, not like anyone or anything Isaiah has ever experienced or known. Therefore Isaiah should not even attempt to liken the Lord to any other god or any other being for He is Holy, Holy, Holy.

Notice in your Bibles how the name "the LORD" is completely capitalized in verse 3, while in verse one, it is not.

In verse 1, the general term of the Lord, Adonai, is used. But in verse 3, the specific name of God is used by the Seraphim- "YHWH."

He is the LORD of hosts. The sovereign of all that is. And this world is full of his glory!

Which means that everything we can see, touch and experience in this world is packed, brimming, and overflowing with the glory of God.

How small Isaiah must have felt. And how foolish. For him, in all his years of life, he has not seen the world for what it really is, and that is a tangible expression of the glory of God- nothing less.

The world is full of God's glory and the world exists to display his Glory.

I believe in that moment, Isaiah understood better than he ever had before, that the end for which God created the world was for His own Glory.

And imagine the lament that must have immediately begun rising inside of him.
C.S. Lewis, in his classic sermon, "The Weight of Glory" says this.

"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Isaiah never saw God's abundant glory in creation before. Not like this.
This glory has been all around him for his entire life but he was insensible to it.
Yet here, with this vision, the scales have fallen off his eyes.
And his experience is only just beginning.
For as the Seraphim speak in antiphony- that is responsively, verse 4 tells us that their voices shook the doorway which is presumably where Isaiah was standing.
The whole temple- that mightiest of earthly structures, is quaking with every thundering voice.
Adding to the sensory overload is the mysterious cloaking of smoke that filled the house.

I imagine that this smoke was there to protect Isaiah and to diffuse God's glory so Isaiah would not be blinded or consumed.

And then in verse 5, Isaiah responds.
His first words in this entire book are these:
"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips..."

To quote one commentator: **Isaiah has become brutally aware of himself.**
He is lost, undone, ruined- and this because he has just recognized who he is in light of who God is.

One of the most Godly men I have ever know was a friend of mine who was about 15 years older than me.
His name was Tim and he worked as a corporate banker.
He was a very serious man. Very thoughtful. Never flippant.
Tim was a kind and loving guy. He was extremely gentle but he never winked at sin.

He's on the mission field now, but before he left the banking world, he used to go to corporate gatherings where financial leaders who were successful like he was, met.
And one day, as he was chatting casually in a smaller group, one man in the group stood out because he could not stop bragging and referring to himself in glowing terms.
And Tim, this gentle banker, looked the man dead in the eye in front of the whole group and confronted him saying:
"You're nothing."

Wouldn't it be great if we could see ourselves for who we really are in the light of God presence?
We would be forced to confront ourselves.

Because we would become brutally aware of who we really are.

All of our guile, all of our hiding, all of our approval seeking and desire for praise, all of our materialism and worldliness would be laid bare in an instant.
God is holy, holy, holy.
And Isaiah is lost because he is unclean.

Isaiah focuses on the uncleanness of his lips.
But this is just the tip of his person.
His dirty mouth is representative of a dirty heart, dirty hands and a dirty life.
And not just him.
Everyone he lives with is dirty.
They are all, altogether, unclean.

Do you know this sort of experience?
Have you ever been in the presence of the Holy Lord?

If so, the first thing you will have noticed is that you are not nearly as devoted to him as you should be.
He is so worthy of our love, devotion, imitation and worship and yet he gets so little of it from us.

To know God means knowing ourselves for who we really are.
We are nothing- and yet we have being because he has graciously given us life.
And because of his mercy, we are not consumed.

In 1712, Joseph Addison penned these words:
"When all thy mercies, O my God, my rising Soul surveys, Transported with the view I'm lost in wonder love and praise."

To know God is to be utterly humbled.
Whenever we parade around, even secretly, in pride and self-satisfaction, we prove that we are, in that moment, detached from the knowledge of him.
Even when we loath ourselves overmuch, we show that we are far too important to ourselves.

To know God is to recognize our relative unimportance- in comparison with God, yes- but also in comparison with every other person.

But beyond humility, knowing God means that we worship him.
Money, reputation, and worldly pleasure all become profane and distasteful to us when we see him for who he really is.
And this means that no amount of self-discipline will ever cause us to love our own praise or our own possessions any less.
Only the knowledge of God can free us from these lesser loves.

Finally, to know God for who he really is means we love like him.
We become virtuous in his image.
God's law is the projection of his character.
And his law is summed up in love for God and love for our neighbors.
To know God is to be virtuous as he is virtuous.

It means becoming Godly – or to speaking more humanly, to become like Christ.
Christ is meek, pure, strong and loving.
He loves God and loves his neighbor because he knows God.
He's been with God.

Have you been with God?

To know God is to love him and to become like Him in your character.

But notice that in Isaiah 6, something has to happen before Isaiah can be put into God's service.

And this leads us to our next point:

III. Isaiah is Cleansed (6-7)

Just because Isaiah has seen the Lord doesn't mean that he is ready to serve him.
His sin has to be dealt with.
And so, in verses 6 and 7, God, through the agency of his Seraphim does just that.

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Now, we know that this is symbolic.
If the seraphim could truly atone for sin, then Christ would never have had to come to earth to die for his people.
And so, this atonement through the burning coal is a picture of the fire that purifies us from sin.
The fire is that of God's wrath, elsewhere pictured as the fires of hell.
Christ walked into this fire on our behalf on the cross.
This is why his throat became parched on the cross.
He thirsted because he experienced God judgment- not just in body, but in his soul as well.

And because we are in him, our sins have been purified away.
Our God is a consuming fire.
Isaiah experienced only a symbolic touch- a sacrament if you will.
Christ experienced the whole fire in unmitigated fashion on our behalf.

And because he is God, he was able, to walk into the fire, to die and to walk back out in resurrection.

Our guilt is never taken away just by the will of God.
It requires action on his part.
In Isaiah 6, His sin was symbolically atoned for.
In Christ, our sin is taken care of for all time.

And so, now that Isaiah's sin is atoned for- he is finally made fit for service.
This brings us to our final point which is

IV. A Sad Mission and a Sliver of Grace (8-13)

In verse 8, the Lord speaks and asks:
"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
Isaiah immediately replied: **"Here I am! Send me."**

Yet Isaiah's mission was destined to be unfruitful in his lifetime.
For the content of his message was this:

9 And he said, "Go, and say to this people:
"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive."
10 Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

The Lord informs Isaiah that the people would not repent.
And so, in verse 11, Isaiah asks:

11 ... "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste,
12 and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
13 And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled."

The promised destruction of Judah will be total...almost.
Because at the very end of verse 13, there is a sliver of grace.

The holy seed is its stump.

And this prepares us for what will come later in chapter 11:
Isaiah 11:1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

The shoot that comes off of the stump of Jesse will be Jesus.
He is the sliver of grace in an otherwise dismal future.

God's judgment, though severe, is not final.
For the nation of Judah, things will get worse before they get better.
But God will show grace.

And so, our response to this passage should be to reach out for God's grace.

While we have life, God's grace is available to us.
Consider the thieves on the crosses with Jesus.
One mocked Jesus even while he was being crucified.
But the other believed in him.
By his own admission that believing thief deserved the cross.
He knew he was a bad man.
And yet, even in his last minutes of life, he found grace through faith in Christ.

God's grace is our only hope for salvation.
And while we have breath, it is available to us.
So reach out for the grace offered to you in Christ Jesus.

Amen.