



This awe-filled scene radiates divine mystery and power. For generations it was viewed as the template for Christian worship. There is confession, “I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips!” There is the assurance of pardon and cleansing of sin when the live coal is placed on Isaiah’s lips. There is the proclamation of praise when the angels extol the Holiness of God. There is the offering of Isaiah to serve the Lord in response to God’s glory and call, and there is the sermon – the message the prophet is meant to proclaim to the people.

It takes place in the temple, and perhaps specifically the innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies. There the Ark of the Covenant resides, housing the Ten Commandments. Only the High Priest may enter this place, for it was considered dangerous to be too close to God, thus his reaction, “Woe is me...for mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord of Hosts!”

It is important to turn to texts like Isaiah 6 on a regular basis. They remind us, despite humanity’s prodigious power, to analyze, explain, and comprehend, that there is something far greater, far more powerful, and far more majestic than we could ever hope to ascend to.

It may sound esoteric but has real world consequences. Isaiah is a prophet, called to hold the people accountable to God’s law. Isaiah has

been railing against the people for waywardness for five chapters, and suddenly he is confronted with his own weakness and his own sin.

The temptation for many is to see sin and to condemn it enthusiastically while all the time believing ourselves to be superior and above it. Such an attitude overtime can lead to smug, sanctimonious self-righteousness, and abuse of power. For Isaiah, it caught up with him; though it did not diminish the truth of his judgments, it clearly puts them in a different light.

While we do not know Isaiah’s precise sin, we presume it has something to do with what he is saying to the people. As a prophet whose lips are his profession, his gift, his command from God; suddenly realized he has been using this tool not simply for righteousness, but for sin. It caused him grave, even terrifying fear. So much so that the live coal brings relief. As heat has the power to excise germs from open wounds (that would otherwise fester) and ultimately bring healing, so too does the moment of confession.

Worship must not simply be a lovefest. It is critical to be reminded of our own proclivity to selfishness and sin. But not to wallow in misery and be laden with guilt.

To recognize them is to confess them, to be cleansed of them, to be free of them. To finally fully embrace God’s love. Garrison Keillor once said:

I've heard a lot of sermons in the past ten years or so that make me want to get up and walk out. They're secular, psychological, self-help sermons, friendly but of no use. They didn't make you want to straighten up. They didn't give you anything hard. At some point and in some way a sermon has to direct people toward the death of Christ and to the campaign God has waged over the centuries to get our attention.

This community at Brick Church is not simply meant to help you live your best life, to not only be your friend, but to offer you the challenge and the blessing of walking the path that Christ trod on this earth.

In getting our confession and our sins behind us, we are ready to receive the true glory of this scene. As soon as Isaiah encounters God, he shrinks in fear. Once he has confessed he is ready to appreciate this vision. The *mysterium tremendum* of God, the numenal presence of that which is wholly other. With our sin ever before us, we hide our eyes and turn away from God, and so fail to see the divine glory all around us.

We call God "Holy" but this actually amounts to saying we cannot comprehend what God is. The Hebrew *qadesh*, translated as "holy" does not mean "pious" or "pure", but "distinct, other, set apart". God is something entirely different. German theologian, Rudolph Otto, described this holiness of God in the early 1900s as *mysterium tremendum*. This is the overwhelming awe that one feels in the presence of the tremendous and powerful divine mystery.

The six-winged angels in this scene amplify the otherness of this encounter and the fantastic beings obeisance underscores the power and glory of God. These were seraphs, meaning "fiery ones" but even their light is as dim as a lone candle in the midst of a vast sun.

One commentator explained the angels' action:

As a [person] brought suddenly into the sunlight, especially if out of a darkened chamber, by an instinctive action shades [their] eyes...so these burning creatures, confronted with the still more fervid and fiery light of the divine nature, fold one pair of their great white pinions over their shining faces...

Even the angels dared not look at the Lord but even so they spontaneously burst into praise, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the pivots of the threshold shook at the sound of their voices and the house was filled with smoke. Even Hollywood could not conceive a more fantastic scene.

It is the angel's song that is the first part of the *Sanctus* we sing at communion each month in order to lift our voices. Our worship at Brick is meant to center our praise in this mysterious, holy, awesome presence of God.

The Processional is meant to usher us into to the grandeur of the divine presence. The Prayer of Adoration sets the frame reminding us of God's power, glory, and might. Even the more subdued Prelude hushes our harried souls, forcing us not to hear but to listen – to listen more intently and to be ready for that which is to come.

This worship resets our souls, as centers our minds. It puts both our problems and our powers in perspective. It forces us to meet the fullness of God head-on, so to speak. Which is utterly essential in this age of degradation of worship. The challenge is not just the sermons that Keillor decried. His words could describe much of the problem with worship, “secular, psychological, self-help... friendly but of no use.”

A great gift of Jesus is His ability to enable us to understand God, to wrap a portion of our brains around the nature of divine love. But there is a recent tendency to what some call “Jesus-alotry”, a so-called idolatry of Jesus. Rather than a true idolatry, it amounts to the practical elimination of two members of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit and God the Creator in our faith calculations, which leads to warped understandings of God and a presumption that God is utterly knowable. And this fallacy leads to self-deception. If this God can be put in a box, so to speak, then this God can be controlled, ignored and dispatched.

There is a scene in the Western movie *Unforgiven*, by Clint Eastwood, in which Richard Harris, a gunman from out of town looking for a fortune, plays an Englishman commenting on the recent assassination of the American President while describing the difficulty of doing the same to a King or Queen. “Your hands would shake...the sight of royalty would cause you to dismiss all thoughts of bloodshed, and you would stand in awe.”

Why not ignore a worship that does not give you anything different from what you find in your daily life, that does not usher you into the awesome presence of God?

Worshipping the glorious, immense God can heal us; can align us like a car that needs alignment.

Teddy Roosevelt knew this need and he found it in nature. He would go outside with naturalist friend, William Beebe, to gaze at the faint light spot of light mist in the sky beyond the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square Pegasus constellation and then one or the other would say:

That is the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda.
It is as large as our Milky Way.
It is one of a hundred million galaxies.
It is 750,000 light-years away.
It consists of one hundred billion suns.

After an interval Beebe reports Mr. Roosevelt would grin at him and say, “Now I think we are small enough. Let’s go to bed.” (As told by Henry Sloane Coffin) Once you know you are “small enough” you are finally ready to listen and to see!

To see what that English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said so well, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God!” It is the grandeur we so desperately need. That Isaiah needed. This vision took place when the “good old days” of King Uzziah’s reign were a distant memory. Decades ago, when Israel prospered and kept their enemies at bay; when they built towers and agriculture blossomed. But the Assyrian menace was on the rise and would undo the peace and prosperity they had known for so long. And Isaiah and God’s people had a long, hard road ahead.

It is into this setting...

...that Isaiah sees the grandeur of God;

...that Isaiah, despite his own sin and weakness;

...that Isaiah, in fear and trembling and in hope beyond hope;

...that Isaiah, in the clarity of this awesome and wondrous God,

...is given the confidence and temerity to believe that he can be a part of something beyond himself. That he can be a partner in turning the world back around; that the illusion of hopelessness is swept away by the *mysterium tremendum*; that Isaiah dares speak to this Almighty God, "Here am I! Send me!" Amen.