

TRINITY SUNDAY
LECTIONARY YEAR B

by Rev. Emily Chapman
June 7, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77004-6917
713-528-0527
www.stpaulshouston.org

Lectionary Texts:

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; and John 3:1-17

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

This Sunday, Trinity Sunday, is the specified date in the Church calendar where we try to wrap our minds around one of the great mysteries of God. It is the day where we try to talk about and understand just who God is and how God can be three things at once. We come up with metaphors and illustrations to try to understand. But if we read our story from Isaiah this morning, we see that God is bigger than our understanding and defies our categories.

What must it have been like for Isaiah, going to the Temple, expecting to have the same sort of experience he had in the Temple so many times before, and then to have his mind blown by this encounter with God, who it turns out is far too big to even fit into the Temple. This is a God that is constantly taking us by surprise. Isaiah has been in the Temple before, but did he ever go expecting such a powerful

encounter? Without warning, there are six-winged creatures calling to each other, smoke everywhere, the pivots on the great Temple began to tremble, threatening to turn Solomon's world and all that Israel knew about God into a pile of rubble. And to top it all off, a voice calls out to poor, frightened Isaiah through the chaos.

How terrified he must have been. In spite of who Isaiah was, despite his attempts at faithfulness, and all precautions of righteousness, the moment he finds himself truly in the presence of the Almighty, he knows himself to be unclean. His first words of response are, "Woe to me, I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips." His encounter with God leads him first and foremost to confession. He knows when he comes into the presence of the living God that he is a sinner, a failure, unworthy to encounter the Holy One.

This is not uncommon — it's one of the reasons that before we take communion every week, before we come to this table to encounter the living God, we pray a prayer of confession, acknowledging before God that we are unworthy of such a gift.

But what does God, the Holy one do?

He touches a coal to Isaiah's lips, and blots out his sin, freeing him to respond to God with an enthusiastic, "here I am! Send me!"

What allows such a response to such a terrifying scene? And this scene is terrifying even before we read the rest of Chapter 6, where Isaiah is commanded to tell the people that God is going to lay waste to them. How on earth can Isaiah manage that? The answer of course, has more to do with God than Isaiah. The greatest attribute we learn about God in this passage comes from the words of the six-winged seraphs, who called to one another "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory." God is the model of holiness, the One who makes us holy and able to follow...it is the holiness of God in Isaiah that allows him to do what God calls him to do.

We don't talk a lot about holiness anymore. In fact, it's become almost a bad word—after all, no one wants to come across as "holier-than-thou". And it is certainly true that holiness can become a perverted form of self indulgence and self-

righteousness. People have done terrible, violent things because they believed they were creating a more holy world. But that is where we make mistakes, when WE begin to think that we can create holiness. Holiness comes to us just as it came to Isaiah – from a Holy God. After all, Isaiah learned that all his piety and righteousness could only carry him so far when he truly came face-to-face with the overwhelming holiness of God. While we might not feel the pivots of this towering church tremble, we come into this place to encounter the Holy One, and I hope, we come that we might also become more holy.

Last week, we talked about the gift of the Holy Spirit, the person of the Trinity that works in the world today, helping us to follow the commandment from God that says “Be holy as I am holy.” So while it is God’s work in us that makes us holy, there are certainly things we can do to cultivate holiness in our own lives. It is work, and it is discipline. John Wesley believed that holiness was the aim of all life, and he put into place concrete practices to cultivate holiness in his own life. But he also gathered with brothers and sisters for accountability. There were 22 questions that were asked of every person gathered. I invite to listen and to think of how asking these questions could help us to live holy lives.

Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?

Do I confidentially pass on to others what has been said to me in confidence?

Can I be trusted?

Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?

Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?

Did the Bible live in me today?

Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?

Am I enjoying prayer?

When did I last speak to someone else of my faith?

Do I pray about the money I spend?

Do I get to bed on time and get up on time?

Do I disobey God in anything?

Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?

Am I defeated in any part of my life?

Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?

How do I spend my spare time?

Am I proud?

Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican?

Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?

Do I grumble or complain constantly?

Is Christ real to me?

Wesley and the early Methodists set a high standard. But it was because he truly believed that holiness was the most crucial project of life on earth and for Wesley, it was nothing short of a renewal of the whole image of God. He believed that it had to do not only with people's personal relationship with God and daily practices, but with the whole of creation becoming more like God. This was another guardian against the kind of holiness that we have such a problem with today. It wasn't about one's own personal piety; it wasn't individual. To be holy was to be a part of a community that was striving to be made perfect in love and that this holiness would overflow into the transformation of the economic and political power in the world, making the world a more just place. For Wesley, holiness was what leads to the new creation that we long for — a world in which justice rolls down like waters, where God wipes away every tear, and death and crying and pain are no more.

It may not be so easy for us, who have probably not encountered the incredible holiness of God in the unmistakable way that Isaiah does. But we do encounter holiness in our world, in our community, and certainly at this table. We come, praying that as we take Jesus' body and blood, God may dwell in us more fully and we might come a step closer to being holy as God is Holy. We know that we, like

Isaiah, do not approach God as worthy recipients of grace. But we know that God the Son, our Savior, has blotted out our sins just as God used the coal to blot out Isaiah's, allowing him to respond to God. And we know that God the Spirit dwells within and among us, so that however we encounter God in this world, be it in prayer, in worship, in Bible study, in service, that Spirit makes us able to respond to God like Isaiah, with an enthusiastic "here I am! Send me!" In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.