

THE BURNING ONES

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson

Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. No king like Uzziah had reigned since Solomon hundreds of years before. At no time had national pride stood so high as during King Uzziah's reign. Never before had the nation's dream of sovereignty touched such remote borders. But King Uzziah died. Young Isaiah, probably a teen aged boy, never knew another king. The nation was shocked and sadden at Uzziah's death. After reigning 52 years, Uzziah was dead. But if earthly kings are mortal, the heavenly King is immortal.

In the year that King Uzziah died, a vision of the glory of the King of heaven overpowered Isaiah. *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... The pivots on the thresholds shook ... and the house filled with smoke.* Isaiah's description is meant to fill us with awe. God's magnificent throne room! The smell of incense! Angelic choirs! All that pomp of splendor, all that sheen of angel wings, was borrowed from the descriptions of Babylonian and Assyrian potentates. Isaiah sees God in terms of an all powerful, absolute, authoritarian ruler.

One aspect of God's unchallenged power is *holiness*. *Seraphs* -- fiery, winged, angelic beings sing antiphonally, *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts*. In God's awful presence, Isaiah cries out, *Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I love among a people of unclean lips.* God is thrice holy. *Holiness*, unfortunately, carries negative connotations for many of us. We're critical of people who have a *holier than thou attitude*. When I hear the word *holy* I think of churches who identify themselves as *holiness churches*. *Holiness*, for them, means preaching against smoking, drinking, cussing, dancing, going to movies, wearing lipstick and jewelry and other such things. Most Presbyterians consider that kind of holiness legalistic and

we don't like it. The Presbyterian Church is not a holiness church in that sense. But in another sense the Presbyterian church has traditionally emphasized God's holiness. The Hebrew word for *holiness* means *to set apart, make distinct, put at a distance from*. Traditionally, Presbyterians emphasize God's distance from us – at least we use to. Traditional Presbyterian worship emphasized God's holiness, God's transcendence—and it's given us the unenviable reputation of being too formal, too stodgy. But when Isaiah speaks of God's holiness he means that God is *wholly other* refusing to be domesticated as a cozy feeling or a consoling projection of our imagination. In Isaiah, God is incomparable: *To whom, then, will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One (Isaiah 40:25)*. God is unapproachable. The Bible asks, *Who is able to stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?* God is the utterly unlike human beings: *I am God, and not human, the Holy One in your midst (Hosea 11:9)*. God is exalted and sublime: *Thus says the high and lofty one that inhabits eternity, whose name is holy: I dwell in the high and holy place (Isaiah 57:15)*. Holiness is *otherness*. *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts*, chant the seraphim. Isaiah's vision reveals God as wholly other, incomparable, unapproachable, utterly unique, exalted and sublime.

So much for Isaiah's exalted vision of God. Now what about us? When we think of God or, in our day and age, I need to say, *if* we think at all of God, how do we picture God? Do we envision God as an oriental potentate? Let's be utterly frank. Most of us are skeptical about absolute power. *Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Many of us, myself included, rebel against authoritarianism. Albert Camus, in his book of essays, *The Rebel*, rebels against God the cosmic autocrat. Many intelligent people have rejected God whom they envision as a totalitarian tyrant. The novelist Virginia Woolf, for example, utterly rejected God. Our book discussion group just finished reading her tragic classic novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. I

recently came across a quotation from a letter Woolf sent to her sister Vanessa. Woolf had just come from a visit with the poet, T.S. Eliot. She writes, *I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic (a Christian), believes in God... and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.* Many people find it impossible to believe in Isaiah's high and lofty, holy God.

There's another reaction to Isaiah's vision of God coming from another direction. Many committed, deeply religious, contemporary Christians prefer the idea of God as our non-judgmental buddy, our closest friend, the one who walks with us, and talks with us, and pats us on the head and tells us that we're OK. Isaiah's God is too formal for our informal times; too dignified. Too terrifying. Too *wholly other* for most of us who live in the household of Homer Simpson and watch MTV. If the only vision of God we had in the Bible was this one, of a holy God who is high and lifted up, I'd be concerned. I'd be worried. I'd be frightened. Let's face it, Isaiah's God is a frightening God. Does this powerful, holy God care about us little people – or is he like a cosmic Stalin? Can this high and lofty God hear or answer our pathetic cries? Can this God sympathize with our weaknesses? Is Isaiah's God a demanding and unreasonable parent who becomes terribly displeased when his or her children bring home anything less than straight A's on their report card? And will the vision of this powerful God lead people to abuse the power they wield over spouse or children or workers? If the only vision we had of God was this one, I'd be deeply troubled.

But without Isaiah's vision of a high and lofty, holy God our belief in God would be greatly diminished. I wonder if our entertainment mentality – which I share with most people –

keeps us from experiencing God's awesomeness and transcendence. I wonder if anybody worshipping in our sanctuary ever has Isaiah's vision of a high and lofty holy God. The architecture of the sanctuary is definitely meant to point us to a holy God. But does what happens here enable us to catch at least a fleeting glimpse of a high, lofty, holy God? Maybe sometimes we're too folksy. Maybe there isn't enough time for silence for people to really wonder about God and encounter God.

Three closing remarks. First, Isaiah didn't see God because he was more spiritually attuned than others. God graciously revealed himself to him. Jesus *did* say that the pure in heart shall see God – but in the Gospel God is graciously revealed to weaklings, sinners, doubters and those rebelling against God. Secondly, Isaiah was one of the greatest prophets of social righteousness. *Pursue justice and champion the oppressed; give the orphan his right, plead the widow's cause* he preached. To the rich and powerful Isaiah preached, *You have ravaged the vineyard, and the spoils of the poor are in your houses. Is it nothing to you that you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor.* How did Isaiah become such a powerful prophet of social righteousness? It began in the Temple with his experience of a high, lofty and holy God who sides with *little people*, the powerless and poor. Finally, Christians warmly and eagerly embrace Isaiah's vision of God, high and lifted up, because we see God in Christ lifted high on the cross.

*High and lifted up, I see Him on the eternal Calvary,
And two pierced hands are stretching east and west o'er
land and sea.
On my knees I fall and worship that great Cross that
shines above,
For the very God of Heaven is not Power, but Power of
Love.*

Most holy God, the earth is filled with your glory, and in your presence angels stand in awe. Enlarge our vision, that we may recognize your power at work in your Son and join the apostles and prophets as heralds of your saving word. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.