

**Purified for Service**  
**May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015**

**Isaiah 6:1-8**  
**Pentecost 1 B**

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God's people weren't doing so great.

It's not like God wasn't doing his part. He'd given them every advantage, every chance, every blessing he possibly could. He grew them into a vast nation from the beginnings of just one man and his barren wife. He led them out of slavery piled with riches. He fed and clothed them on their journey through the desert. He gave them a new land to call their own, he drove out the people occupying that land for them. He gave them the best set of rules and regulations a country has ever known, laws of mercy and goodness, laws to keep them apart from the evil nations and keep them close to their God.

Within a few years they'd already forgotten what God asked of them. After they fell and called for help a few times, they finally demanded a king so they could be like everyone else. Their first king was a disaster. The second was okay, but made some big mistakes. The third, he was okay too, but made his own mistakes. After that there was a struggle for power and the nation split. The larger chunk of it never publicly returned to worshipping the true God. The smaller, southern half bounced back and away time and again...mostly away.

One of the last good kings to rule that southern kingdom was going to die in this year. The northern kingdom was about to be destroyed by the nation of Assyria because God's patience had finally run out. They didn't know it yet, but the southern kingdom would find itself in the same situation not too much later on facing down Babylon. God's people weren't doing so great.

Of course, we always talk about these events speaking of the nations as a whole. But was everyone in Israel and Judah an unbeliever at this time? Were there no faithful left among any of the people? We read very clearly in other parts of scripture that this was not the case. There were faithful. They may not have been the majority, they may not have been the public face of religion in the country, but they were faithful. And not just a handful, there were thousands in that tiny nation who still treated the Lord as God. But again, things didn't look so great for them.

Hopefully the parallels between that time and right now are obvious. That should help make what happened to Isaiah in our reading all the more meaningful to us: <Read text: Isaiah 6:1-8>.

Isaiah is given a vision of the Lord God. Whether he was literally in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem or whether he was taken to a grander temple of God himself, we don't exactly know. But it was a house of the Lord. And the first thing Isaiah sees is the Lord himself, seated on a throne, in glory and power like we have never known or seen. And above and around him are seraphs, angels. They are singing a song of simple praise to God. And yet though it's so simple and straightforward, it is utterly appropriate. Straight praise for God, confession of what God is. And in voices so thundering that the temple was shaken by it.

But what's perhaps more significant is the pose the angels are taking. They were covering their feet and their faces. Why? Because, even these exalted angels, these holy creations, they still recognized that they were not worthy to stand uncovered in the presence of the Creator himself, so far above everything and so beyond everything he is. They recognized their status before God and adopted this posture to make it plain who was in charge and who had the complete power and authority.

If that was what these angels attending to God himself felt, then we can only imagine Isaiah's heart as he stood in the presence of the thrice-holy God. We hear what he spoke, but we can only imagine the terror in his heart. The angels were holy, they had done what was right and kept God's will. They may have still been beneath God, but at least they hadn't defiled or defied God either. Isaiah knew himself better than that. "**I am ruined!**" he cries out. And rightly so. God is holy, he is light. And that holiness, that light consumes the darkness wherever it shines. That is how God must operate by his very nature; where he is, evil must be destroyed.

Maybe before this moment Isaiah had fooled himself into thinking God was happy with him. Maybe he thought he had kept the law well enough to earn God's favor. Or maybe the burden of his guilt weighed on him. Maybe he knew that he wasn't really doing the right things, he wasn't doing them often enough or he wasn't doing them with the right heart. But neither state of mind could prepare him for the terror he knew at seeing the holy God. Never before had his sin stood in such stark contrast to what the absence of sin looks like. Until now he had no true frame of reference to understand his guilt. Now he did.

God allowed Isaiah to know and understand this terror and fear. Understanding his natural state before God was necessary for what followed. But God did not allow Isaiah to remain in this terror. At his direction, one of the angels performed a symbolic gesture to comfort Isaiah with God's love and mercy. A coal was taken from the fire of the altar and touched to Isaiah's lips. God promised that Isaiah was now made clean.

Why a coal from the altar? This was the fire into which sacrifices were put to atone for the sins of the people. God meant to use these rituals to teach his people that sin could only be paid for in sacrifice and blood. It was from this sign of sacrifice that God brought the coal that healed Isaiah. But the altar also taught that the blood of animals wasn't enough, because the sacrifices had to be offered over and over and over. So it also pointed to the one who would do better. The God and man Jesus who would sacrifice himself once for all. It was by that promise of Jesus, which was already an accomplished fact in God's eyes, that he was able to make this declaration to Isaiah. His sin was atoned for, his guilt was taken away, by the blood of Christ.

But so gracious is God that he doesn't just make this a simple declaration, even though that would be sufficient. He makes it personal. And so he offers Isaiah this physical sign to reassure him of his forgiveness. He touches the coal from the altar to Isaiah's lips. For whatever reason, this was where Isaiah felt his sin the strongest, since that was his confession when he saw God. And so that is where God physically reassured him.

And what happens next continues to astonish, and doubly so. First of all, God needs to send a messenger to his people. Here he is, surrounded by his holy angels. Angel, which literally means "herald" or "messenger" in Hebrew. God needs to send a message and where does he look for a volunteer? He looks, among the sinful, corrupt, broken men who couldn't even save themselves. And even more amazing is this man here, who moments ago was cowering in terror at God, now cannot contain his enthusiasm to carry out this mission God asks. "**Here am I! Send me!**" he shouts. This is the amazing change of faith that God brings about through the forgiveness of sins. Now Isaiah cannot wait to do the Lord's work, and he doesn't even stop to ask what might be asked of him. Isaiah doesn't care. God wants it done, whatever it is; Isaiah wants to do it. Eyes closed, head first, Isaiah doesn't care what it involves as long as he's doing it for God, such is his love and trust in the one who has saved him.

Brothers and sisters, things do not look so great for us. The world and the nation we live in are worsening every day. But that does not mean we are alone. That does not mean that work for the Lord should be abandoned because there is no hope. And it certainly does not mean we have any reason to despair or even to worry. Our own faith is no less miraculous than the experience Isaiah had. Through the law, God has told us what it means to be holy. And when we look at ourselves compared to that holiness, we can know only terror and fear of God. God has crushed our spirits, showing us that we have nothing good in ourselves to hope in. But God did not leave us in that state of hopelessness. God chose to rescue you. He chose to live as you, he chose to die for you, he chose to give you the perfect life he lived. He chose to send you his Holy Spirit through water and word to create a new life, a new faith in your heart. He chose to comfort you and strengthen that faith with the personal gift of his body and blood.

And the change that takes place in us is no less miraculous than the change in Isaiah's attitude either. We are brought out of our natural state of fearing and hating God into a life that loves and trusts God. Trusting that God can, will and has done what he has promised us. Just think of all the things God tells us about our world or himself that he has caused us to trust. We certainly couldn't let Trinity Sunday slide by without mentioning that divine mystery. Three persons, one God, all equal, different and distinct yet one. It boggles the logical, limited human mind, and yet by the miracle of faith we can accept it. But it doesn't stop there.

Other truths that sinful man scoffs at are fact to us. The truth of our salvation by grace alone. The comfort that God knew and chose us from before the creation of the world. The miracle of conversion itself. The idea that mere words are the greatest power we have been given from God, both to strengthen our own trust and create it in others. The fact that God is in control of this world right now, working all things that happen to us on the large and small scale to accomplish our eternal well-being. All things that sound crazy, they're all contrary to the visible evidence, but we know they are more true than any "fact" we learned in school, they are all things God teaches us that by faith we can accept without question.

The miracle of this change goes beyond our passive trust though. Our relief at having our sins taken away, the joy of forgiveness and being able to be close to God cannot be contained. We have been purified by the blood from the altar and now full of God's grace and the Holy Spirit that like Isaiah, we just *have* to respond! We now want to do the things that please God. The thought of giving, unselfishly, of our time and our energy and ourselves to the Lord and his work is not a burden, it's just who we are now. Spending time with him and in his word is our comfort, not work, not an obligation. Every trouble that the devil and the world try to throw at us to stir us up to worry and doubt can just bounce off the wall of trust created by God within us. God is in control. Not me. Not the devil or any other evil force. God. And that means everything is going to be alright.

So, purified for this life of serving God, we go to serve. In all we do, we keep his primary mission at the center of our lives; to grow in his word and to go out with his word. Everything we do is centered around our God and this mission, carried out through the joy of being purified within. Our God has purified you from the altar of sacrificed Son. He has given you a new heart and a new life. Use that life to serve him faithfully with joy until your work here is done. Amen.