

“HOLY FEAR, HOLY GRACE”
Is 6:1-8; Lk 5:1-11; 1 Cor 14:12b-20

We humans, with our flaws and shortcomings, can't fully grasp the perfect purity of God. Like the addition of the strong winds and empty hydrants added to the wildfires we've been hearing about in California have caused them to burn out of control, a sinner in the presence of a holy God is a dangerous combination. The fires are bad enough under normal conditions but adding these variables of wind and lack of water has increased the devastation. Sinners whose righteousness is as "filthy rags," cannot stand in the presence of a Holy God. When the two come together, the result makes the California wildfires look like child's play!

Isaiah, in his vision of heaven, encounters the overwhelming glory and holiness of God, leaving him absolutely terrified. Instead of seeking God, Isaiah cries out, ***“Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*** Isaiah, deeply aware of his own sin, recognizes the chasm between his sinful nature and God's perfect holiness. His sinful thoughts and words have alienated him from God, leaving him feeling utterly lost and condemned. He believes he's about to die!

Peter, too, wrestles with the overwhelming presence of God's power. After a fruitless night of fishing, Jesus instructs them to cast their nets again. Miraculously, their nets overflow with a massive haul of fish. Peter, witnessing this divine intervention, is overwhelmed. The weight of his sinfulness becomes unbearable. He falls to his knees before Jesus, crying out, ***“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”***

This same truth applies to us as well. None of us can stand before the holiness of God.

- *Our hearts are filled with envy and discontent.*
- *Our words are often hurtful and angry.*
- *Our minds are consumed by negativity and judgment.*
- *Our actions, both in what we do and fail to do, constantly fall short of God's ideal.*

As Saint Paul reminds us in the closing words of today's epistle, we often act like children, immature in our thinking and yet deeply entrenched in evil.

But while Isaiah's fear was justified, it doesn't tell the whole story. Yes, he was sinful... but not ultimately lost. In the midst of his terror, a seraph touched his lips with a burning coal from the altar, declaring, ***“Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”*** God didn't bring Isaiah to this glorious vision to condemn him, but to offer him salvation. The burning coal of the altar indicates that there was a sacrifice going on! Through the sacrificial offering on the altar, Isaiah's sins were forgiven, and he was given new life and hope.

Likewise, Peter's confession of sinfulness was truthful and accurate, but it didn't lead to rejection. Jesus didn't go away—He ***never leaves us or forsakes us!*** Instead, He assures Peter, ***“Do not be afraid.”*** Jesus came not to condemn, but to save. He is the ultimate sacrifice, ***“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”*** And just as the burning coal cleansed Isaiah's lips, Jesus' words, spoken directly to Peter, didn't just inspire boldness; they gave him the courage and confidence he needed.

At the beginning of each service, we join Isaiah and Peter in confessing our sins and unworthiness. In a very real sense, we cry out, ***“Woe is me, I am lost,”*** and ***“Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man/woman.”*** acknowledging our deep need for God's mercy. We recognize that we deserve nothing but God's ***“temporal and eternal punishment.”*** Yet, just as with Isaiah and Peter, our Lord comes to us not to condemn, but to offer forgiveness and salvation. His words of absolution, ***“I forgive you all your sins,”*** bring us new life and hope. Through Holy Communion, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. As we receive, our guilt and uncleanness are taken away, replaced with His holiness and life.

Isaiah and Peter underwent intense change. Isaiah's cry of ***“Woe is me!”*** was replaced with a resounding ***“Here am I! Send me!”*** Peter, who initially begged Jesus to depart, now clung to him, leaving everything to become one who would ***“catch men alive”*** for the Kingdom. But perhaps the most astonishing aspect is that God chose these men—Isaiah, an unknown prophet, and Peter, an ordinary fisherman—to be His instruments. God doesn't seek the holiest or the most righteous. He doesn't look for the strongest or the most steadfast. Instead, He empowers the seemingly insignificant, demonstrating that His grace can transform anyone into a powerful witness for His kingdom.

Isaiah is often called the ***“fifth Evangelist”*** and the book which bears his name is often called the ***“fifth Gospel”*** and contains so many beautiful prophecies about the coming Messiah. His words paint a vibrant picture of the cross and the suffering servant, a powerful image that foreshadows the very coal that touched his lips and cleansed him.

Peter, though known for his impulsive nature – like stepping out of the boat to walk to Jesus on the water, or denying that he even knew Jesus—played a central role among the apostles. Despite his human frailties, Jesus used him in remarkable ways. In fact, it was Peter who delivered that powerful sermon recorded in Acts—the very first Christian sermon after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

You too have been powerfully transformed by the love, forgiveness, and life-giving presence of Jesus. Though you may not feel like the holiest or the most righteous, our Lord longs to use you! He may not have called you to be a prophet like Isaiah or an apostle like Peter. Yet, your calling is no less significant. Maybe you're a parent, tasked with sharing God's Word with your children. Maybe you're a friend and neighbor, called to serve with love.

Or perhaps you're an employee or employer, entrusted with providing for others. Whatever your role, as a Christian, you're called to share the message of forgiveness. In your everyday vocations, you're just as vital as Isaiah or Peter. And remember, Jesus is using you in countless ways, both seen and unseen. As the hymn writer so eloquently put it in the hymn we just sang:

**“If you cannot speak like angels,
If you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus;
You can say He died for all,
If you cannot rouse the wicked
With the judgment's dread alarms,
You can lead the little children
To the Savior's waiting arms.”**

This Sunday, as we near the end of the Epiphany season, we remember that the Almighty God, the Holy One who filled Isaiah with awe, has come to earth in the person of Jesus. This God, who has power over all creation, even commanding the fish to obey and swim into the disciples' net... comes not to frighten us, but to save us. He doesn't push us away, but draws us close. He takes our sin upon Himself and offers us His own holiness in return, transforming us from within.

And what's the result? We, unlike Isaiah, are now able to join the heavenly chorus, singing praises to God. As we approach His altar, we encounter His grace and mercy, experiencing the reality of forgiveness. Together with the angels and archangels, we proclaim, **“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”** And so, we are not lost, but found. In the name of Jesus, Amen.