

Sine Domino Frustra Laboramus

The Holy Trinity

June 7, 2009

Glendale Lutheran Church

THE HOLY GOD FOR UNHOLY PEOPLE

Isaiah 6:1-8

I.

Besides reading and studying the biblical text and context, another impetus for preparing this sermon was the contemporary song, “Our God Is an Awesome God.” Personally, anyway, it’s one of those songs that’s not easy to put on the shelf – I’ve either been listening to it, singing it, humming it, or whistling it throughout the week:

Our God is an awesome God

He reigns from heaven above

With wisdom, power, and love

Our God is an awesome God.

“Awesome” – that’s one way to describe God. Trinity is another – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – One God, three distinct Persons (figure that one out, and yet when you read New Testament texts, they are replete with references to those Three Persons; such as today’s Gospel reading – Jesus, the Son of Man who came from heaven, calling for Nicodemus to be born again of water and of the SPIRIT, and thus believing the Gospel message that this Christ was the Father’s gift to all of humanity past, present, and future the gift born of love and wisdom and power to save a world of sinners.

That’s awesome! That we learn in confirmation and beyond that this God is OMNI – all present, all powerful, all knowing – that’s awesome as well.

Having said all of that, our God can only be experienced, not defined, and certainly not put into a box of our understanding – I’ve quoted famed Negro preacher James Weldon Johnson so many times, “Young man, young man, your arms are too short to box with God.”

Let’s try one more time – find a word, an image, a picture, an abstract, a perspective, that best bespeaks God. In a vision, Isaiah heard the angels say, “‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ‘Woe is me!’ cried Isaiah. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’”

When you come face to face with God, how else can you feel, except totally and absolutely unworthy to be in the presence of the Lord!

Holy, holy, holy! Except for the “omni” business, this is what separates any mortal being from God, and so to refer to any human being as ‘his holiness’ be it king or pope is pretty bizarre.

Holiness is to be without sin. And to be without sin is to not have to die.

And there is none of us who is without sin, and there is none of us who does not have to die.

II.

That’s what makes the coming of Christ into the world all the more a miracle and mystery. For he was holy, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. And though he was holy, he willingly submitted to the waters of baptism, which was to wash away sins that he hadn’t done. And he maintained that holiness throughout, fighting off Satan at every turn, using prayer and the words of Scripture as his stronghold. The holy Father sent the Holy Son into an unholy world to take its sin upon himself and therefore to

die, which is what sinners have to do! But he was holy, he alone was holy, and still he died..."For God (the Father) so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

III.

The Holy God for Unholy People. Nowhere is that better seen than in our lesson for today. Isaiah's lips had been touched with tongs from the altar of the Lord, and with it his guilt had been taken away and his sin atoned for by the Christ of the Cross, and then he was called to prophesy to the people, to speak the Word of the Lord (believe me, that is a daunting task, for which none of us can adequately prepare; that's why the power of the Spirit is present here and always.) But when in the vision the Lord called out, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for US?" (Did you get that plural 'us'?) When Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me!" he was not headed for 'white field and waiting harvests.' He was headed into a people of unclean lips, a people who were rampant with immoral bodies and idolatrous tongues. His message was simple and sure – it is too late for repentance, too late to make some half-hearted attempt to please God, it is too late to look holier-than-thou, for their corruption was through and through, and the judgment and punishment of Almighty God was just ahead of them, and they were bound for exile. There was no alternative, not at this point, for these Unholy People.

IV.

The Holy God for Unholy People. That is what we are, for sure. Oh, my, it's been a busy week of unholiness. A man shoots and kills a doctor while the latter is at church ushering, except that this was not your average usher or average doctor, he who was known in Wichita KS as performing third

trimester abortions. There were three murders in one night here on the streets of our fair city and area, including a seasoned policeman and of age to be a grandfather in Centreville, IL. Oh, my.

We were reminded still again this week of the horror of the Holocaust with the President's visit to Buchenwald, and one of the past president's (or generals) on TV yesterday said of D-Day, June 6, 1944, "This is a necessary response to the UNHOLY forces of evil we face," and we heard Osama Bin Laden raise his ugly head through another denouncement of western capitalism, and the rhetoric of the Palestinians and Israelis never goes away, one person from Israel saying through the media something like, "This is the land of the Bible. We are the people of the Bible." Oh, my.

I always hesitate to bring up current events and issues because it allows us to keep at arm's length from our own culpability, our own unholiness. It always amazes me that, in Scripture, when the apostle Paul writes the laundry list of sins, he puts gossip right alongside sexual immorality, orgies next to drunkenness, selfish ambition in the same list as witchcraft. You see, we tend to categorize sins, and the worst of them are in society somewhere but not in our lives. That's not the way it works.

The Holy God for Unholy People is with us in mind. We are, indeed, unholy, and unlike the way in which the Holy God originally created man and woman. From that fall, we are not without sin, and therefore not without the prospect of death.

When I first thought of this theme, my mind was gathered around the might and majesty and power and dominion and judgment and righteousness of Almighty God, and imagining that when we approach the throne of that God, we would be as intimidated as Isaiah was when he said, "Woe is me!"

And then I began to think, “The Holy God for Unholy People” is all of that. But it is also filled with promise, and filled with grace. For did not the Holy God bring back the people from exile and restore them as his people. And did not this same God love the world so much that he sent his son into the world that we may not perish eternally but have eternal life. And is not this God “omni!”

Our God is a holy God

He reigns from heaven above

With wisdom, power, and love

Our God is a holy God.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.