

# "Holy God, Holy People"

Isaiah 6:1-8

June 3, 2012

The Holy Trinity

I have been fortunate enough never to have suffered from allergies as I know some of you have. I've been thinking: since food allergies cause a lot of extra work when we put out treats after church, for VBS, and at other times, couldn't you people with allergies just get over them? Why not just overlook your allergies or ignore them? It certainly would make things a lot easier.

Now, before Dr. Onstad or any of our other members who have medical training try to take this pulpit by force to correct what I have just said, let me say that I know that dealing with allergies is not as simple as overlooking or ignoring them. In fact, it's impossible to do that. For someone with allergies to consume or even come in contact with food to which they are allergic can mean serious illness or even death. I had a friend in college who was deathly allergic to fish. While dining out once, the restaurant accidentally got a small piece of fish mixed in with her French fries. Even though it wasn't much, her throat immediately started to contract and, had we not gotten her to the hospital immediately, she would have died. Overlook or ignore an allergen? I don't think so.

Yet sometimes we think that our holy God should be able to do that with sin. Couldn't He just ignore it or overlook sin? It would make things easier. However, such thinking fails to understand either sin or holiness. Sin is a far worse than any allergen – gluten, lactose, nuts, and so on – when it comes to a holy God. Sin doesn't make God ill. Sin violates the very nature of a holy God. So, if we understand that we cannot tolerate even being close to allergens without some bad reaction, why do we expect God to act differently when it comes to how sin affects Him? Yet we think that God should just "get over" His big problem with sin.

That's not possible. God cannot and will not tolerate sin in His presence. We see that in our text today. The prophet, Isaiah, sees the Lord sitting on a throne in His temple. The scene exudes

holiness. The angels themselves, although holy, cover their eyes with their wings and will not even look at the holiness of God out of awe, fear, and respect.

How do we handle the holiness of God? If it makes us uncomfortable, we can try to redefine the identity of God so that we are not so uncomfortable. Some radical critics have said that there is an Old Testament god who is full of wrath and punishment while there is a New Testament god who is full of love and blessing. While we might not go *that* far in our assessment of God, do we think or act as if the God we read about in the Old Testament with all of His holiness and wrath is a bit out of date, while the God we know in the New Testament doesn't emphasize holiness so much any more so that He can talk more about love? Despite our perception (or even hope), the Scriptures declare there to be but one God.

Maybe we try to redefine the nature of God to help us deal with God's holiness. Today is Trinity Sunday and we confess clearly that the only true God is One, yet three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We like to look at the Trinity as if there is some difference in nature or purpose. Maybe we view it as God playing “good cop/bad cop”. God the Father is the holy angry Judge who is out to punish us. God the Son – Jesus Christ – is the gentler Friend who is sympathetic to us. The Holy Spirit is the unknown anonymous God so He's neutral.

Yet look at the song sung by the angels in our text. They could have said, “Holy is the Lord!” But they don't. They sing, “Holy, holy, holy....is the Lord of hosts.” On Trinity Sunday, we are, perhaps, a bit more attentive to such a three-fold reference to God. The Lord here is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, there is no difference in the Godhead: the Father is holy. The Son is holy. The Holy Spirit is holy, just as we will confess in the Athanasian Creed. There is no “good cop/bad cop”. The one God is three in nature, but one in His one essence and in His triune nature.

This backs us into a corner. We cannot deny or dispute the holiness of God so we try to turn it into a good thing for ourselves. I've heard many Christian songs which talk about the neatness of God's glory and the awesomeness of worshiping God in His holiness.

Really? Do you think that it is a cool thing to be in the presence of God's glory and holiness? The prophet, Isaiah, didn't think so. When he was in the presence of God, hearing the angels declare His holiness, feeling the foundations shake and the smoke rise (both symbols of God's anger and punishment), he was not talking about how neat or awesome it was. He was scared to death. He cried out, "Woe is me! (I am as good as dead!) For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" He recognized his utter sinfulness and the complete holiness of the Lord who was unable to tolerate sinfulness without destroying the sinner.

Unfortunately, I don't think we feel that same kind of terror regarding the holiness of God. We have not only watered down sin, but we have also watered down God's holiness. You might think, "We are Christians. It's different for us!" Yet Isaiah was part of the Old Testament people of God and still had this fear. For it's all about the nature of God and the nature of humanity and that hasn't changed from Old Testament to New Testament to today.

We should have the same terror over the holiness of God as Isaiah did for we are sinners just as He is. God does not love us just the way we are, as some people think. The "way we are" is sinful. God hates sin and rejects those who practice it. Left unchanged, we will be swept away by God's anger into eternal punishment. The bad news is that there is nothing we can do to correct the problem. We ARE the problem. Sin is far more than sinful acts we do. Sin is part of our nature. It is who we are.

Only God can correct things. He cannot change who He is as holy. But He can change who we are as sinners. In our text, as Isaiah quivered with fear, the Lord sent one of the seraphim to take a burning coal from the altar and touch Isaiah's lips with it. What's going on here? The altar is where sacrifice for sin is made and atonement for sin is accomplished. A seraph – a servant of the Lord – takes a visible element from that altar and touches Isaiah to bring the benefits of the altar to him

personally. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, the seraph declares that a new reality has been created, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

With his guilt being taken away and sin covered or atoned for, Isaiah is a completely new person. He has not just been cleaned up or refurbished. He is now holy. Isaiah, now being declared holy by the Lord, is able to stand before the Lord in His holiness without fear of punishment or destruction.

God has worked that same change in us in the same way. The Father sends the Son who accomplishes the atonement for sin on the altar of the cross. Yet the benefits of that atonement have to be brought to each of us personally. The Lord sends forth servants – pastors – to touch each of us with a visible means to accomplish that. When the water of baptism touches our heads; when the word of absolution touches our ears; when the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper touches our tongues, the Lord declares that a new reality has been created and sustained. The Lord’s servant declares, “Behold, these things have touched you; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

God the Holy Spirit allows us to receive these gifts in faith so that a whole new person comes into being. God’s work through Word and Sacrament does not simply clean you up or refurbish you. It changes who you are. God, working through these visible means, makes you holy. As the Scripture says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) We are able to stand before the Lord in His holiness without fear of punishment or destruction as long as we remain in Christ through these means.

But there is more than just rejoicing over this wonderful work accomplished in us by God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is a response to it as well. In our text, the Triune God says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah neither comes up with excuses for why he can’t go for the Lord, nor justifications for why He doesn’t have to go for the Lord. He instinctively responds out of joy and gratitude, “Here am I! Send me.”

Part of the problem we have when the Lord still calls in our congregation, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” is that we do not understand the depth of our sinfulness, or the height of God’s holiness. We do not value all that God has done to bridge that gap. We take it very lightly. We are very comfortable in our sinfulness and very lackadaisical about God’s holiness. We are good at coming up with excuses for not responding and justification for why we don’t have to respond. However, when we truly understand our sinfulness, truly realize God’s holiness, and truly appreciate all that He has done to touch us, make us holy, and bless us, our response will quickly and naturally be, “Here am I! Send me.”

Trinity Sunday is more than getting the doctrine of the Holy Trinity right. It is not merely an academic exercise. It is understanding and fully appreciating God the Father creating us in holiness; God the Son redeeming us in righteousness; and God the Holy Spirit making us holy through the visible elements of Word and Sacrament. Trinity Sunday is about life: our life because of God; our life in God; and our life for God. He is a holy God and, through Him, we are a holy people – His people. Amen.