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Homiletics: Sermon Study on Isaiah 6:1-8

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HOMILETICS

EISENACH OLD TESTAMENT SELECTIONS

May 3	Ascension	Ps. 110:1-4	The Triumphant Christ
May 6	Exaudi	Psalm 42	The Redeemer Fills Our Whole Life
May 13	Pentecost	Ezek. 36:22-28	God Converts Men to Be His People
May 20	Trinity	Is. 6:1-8	God Our Creator, Redeemer, Guide
May 27	1 S. a. Tr.	Deut. 6:4-13	Use God's Word for His Sake

Sermon Study on Isaiah 6:1-8 for Trinity

While this text does not treat the doctrine of the Holy Trinity *ex professo*, to which this Sunday is dedicated, it presents one of the most glorious revelations in all Scripture of Him who is Three in One, and One in Three, and invites the pastor who preaches on this text to set the Triune God before his people in the majesty of His holiness and in the glory of His grace.

Though it does not stand at the beginning of the prophecies of Isaiah, it is almost certainly an account of the call of this man into the office of prophet, for it pictures a man of unclean lips (v. 5) as cleansed and entering into the service of the Thrice Holy as His messenger (vv. 7-8).

The time of the revelation is narrowly fixed in v. 1 as "*in the death year of King Uzziah.*" It must have taken place *before* the death of Uzziah, for the date of the vision which Isaiah saw is fixed "in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (Ch. 1:1).

In this death year of King Uzziah, Isaiah says, "*I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the skirts of His robe (A. V., 'His train') filled the temple.*" Isaiah's *seeing* on this occasion was *prophetic vision*, so often referred to in the Scriptures. Cp. Dan. 8:2; Amos 7:8; 8; 2; Acts 10:11; Rev. 1:10-12. In this connection it should be remembered that prophets are also called *seers* in Scripture on account of this prophetic vision. Cp. 2 Sam. 24:11 (*chozeh*) and 1 Sam. 9:9 (*roeh*).

Delitzsch describes this prophetic *seeing* as follows: "Isaiah

saw, and that not when asleep and dreaming; but God gave him, when awake, an insight into the invisible world, by opening an inner sense for the supersensuous, whilst the action of the outer senses was suspended, and by condensing the supersensuous into a sensuous form, on account of the composite nature of man and the limits of his present state. This was the mode of revelation peculiar to an ecstatic vision. . . ."¹

In such a prophetic, ecstatic vision Isaiah saw the Lord (Hebrew: *eth adonai*). The designation *adonai* is used in the Old Testament of God only, never of human masters. It signifies the majesty of God as compared with weak, sinful man. The form is plural, even as the form *elohim*, so often used for God in the Old Testament, is plural.

This majestic "Lord," Isaiah, in prophetic vision, saw "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the skirts of His robe filled the temple." The question arises whether the vision is to be thought of as picturing God sitting in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Hebrew word *bekhal* is regularly used to designate the Temple at Jerusalem, even as it was at times used before the building of the Temple to signify the Tabernacle. Cp. 1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3. According to Gesenius² the word in a number of passages signifies, not the Temple at Jerusalem, but heaven itself. Such a passage is Ps. 11:4: "Jehovah is in His holy temple; His throne is in the heavens." Cp. also Micah 1: 2-3. . . . "let the Lord Jehovah be for a witness among you, the Lord from His holy temple. For behold, Jehovah is going forth from His place, and He will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth." Since heaven is the temple where Jehovah's throne is, we understand the temple in Is. 6:1 also of heaven. Isaiah, in prophetic vision, was granted a view of heaven itself, and there he saw God sitting, as befits His majesty, "on a throne, high and lifted up." The picture of God sitting upon a throne is frequent in Scripture. Cp. 2 Chron. 18:18; Ps. 9:4, 7; 11:4; *et al.* The throne is high and lifted up, as befits a great King. Cp. Solomon's throne, 1 Kings 10:18-20.

1. Clark's Foreign Theological Library, Keil and Delitzsch, *Isaiab*, Vol. I. Edinburgh, 1866, p. 189.

2. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907. Boston and New York.

The description of the Lord upon His throne in heaven is completed by the note that "the skirts of His robe filled the temple." His robe, as befits the Lord of heaven and earth, emphasizes by its ample train the unsurpassed greatness of its wearer.

The picture is, as it must needs be if it is to be meaningful to men, highly anthropomorphic. What God said to Moses, Ex. 33:20, when Moses desired to see God's glory, remains true for Isaiah and all men in this mortal, sinful life: "Thou canst not see My face; for there shall no man see Me, and live." Therefore the vision of Jehovah must be anthropomorphic, and the human form, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the skirts of His robe filling the temple, both veil the glory which mortal eyes cannot endure and reveal it in a form understandable and bearable to the Prophet.

John 12:37-41 refers to this vision of Isaiah and identifies the Lord upon the throne with Jesus. Delitzsch aptly remarks: . . . "the incarnation of God is the truth embodied in all the Scriptural anthropomorphisms, and the name of Jesus is the manifested mystery of the name Jehovah."³ V. 2: "*Seraphim were standing over Him, six wings, six wings to one; with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.*" The term *seraphim* as referring to heavenly creatures occurs only here in Scripture. Hebraists are divided on the question of its derivation and meaning. Some derive it from *seraph*, "to burn up, to consume with fire." This word is fairly common in Scripture. Cp. Is. 44:16; Lev. 13:52; and many others. The fiery serpents which God sent among Israel in the wilderness, Num. 21:6, are called *nechashim seraphim*. However, the idea of "fiery" does not seem to fit the seraphim in their role Is. 6:2. Gesenius⁴ derives the word here from a root *saraph* meaning "to be high, lofty, prominent," and says that the seraphim in our passage are so called "as being of elevated rank, princes." This fits our context, where they stand nearest to God, as the highest princes in an earthly royal palace might stand nearest the King.

The seraphim, in indefinite number, "were standing over Him," not over "it," as the A. V. has it. The "standing" should be thought of as the standing of servants, who are at the beck and call of their

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 190.

4. See Gesenius, *op. cit.*, sub *saraph*.

master when they stand, rather than describing a physical act, for, as the last words of our verse reveal, in a physical sense they were flying, not standing.

The seraphim are described as furnished with six wings each, for this is the meaning of "six wings, six wings to one." Angels in the New Testament are often, though not always (cp. Rev. 14:6), pictured without wings, as men. Cp. Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; *et. al.* The seraphim in the vision are, however, equipped with six wings, and the purpose of the wings is shown. "With two he covered his face," for even the holy angels stand in awe of Jehovah and veil their faces from such majesty. "With two he covered his feet." Smith-Goodspeed⁵ translate "loins" instead of "feet." Cp. ch. 7:20, "hair of the feet," where certainly the "loins" or *pudenda* are intended. Gesenius denies that the word is to be understood of the *pudenda* in this passage. It must, however, be admitted that the word, so understood here, would yield good sense. Furthermore this use of the word occurs, as we have shown above, in the very next chapter, 7:20. If the word is so understood, a parallel may be found in Ex. 20:26. Everything here serves to emphasize the holiness and majesty of God whom the seraphim serve.

"And with two he flew," hovering about the throne, ready for instant service.

V. 3: "And this one cried to that one and said: 'Holy, holy, holy, Jehovah of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.'" The holiness of Jehovah, which is indicated by the covering of faces and feet on the part of the seraphim, is proclaimed by their antiphonal cry: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts.'

The basic meaning of *qadosh* seems to be the equivalent of our English words "separate," "apart."⁶ The term "the Wholly Other," signifying God's absolute transcendence, is probably the best rendition of "the Holy One." "God's holiness manifests itself in its transcendence over all created things."⁷ Isaiah, Ch. 40, v. 25: "To

5. See Smith and Goodspeed, *The Bible, An American Translation*, Is. 6:2.

6. Eduard Koenig, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Stuttgart, 1922, states: "Der intransitive Grundstamm *qadesb* hat urspruenglich die Bedeutung 'abgesondert sein'" (p. 172 f.).

7. Theodore Laetsch, "The Holiness of God," *Proceedings of the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference*, 1940, p. 39 f. Cp. also F. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, Concordia Publishing House, 1924, I, p. 561.

whom, then, will ye liken Me or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One," indicates that there is no human nor angelic standard by which God's power and wisdom can be measured.

The complete transcendence of God implies also God's absolute sinlessness and impeccability. "Negatively expressed, God's ethical perfection is God's transcendence above all that is sinful, His complete separation from all that is ethically wrong. . . . Positively stated, it is the absolute rightness and rectitude of all His actions in thoughts, words, and deeds."⁸ God's holiness as ethical purity is brought out in such classical passages as Lev. 11:43 f., where after the law respecting unclean meats it is stated: "Ye shall not pollute yourselves with these that you should be defiled therewith" . . . and: "Be ye holy, for I am holy," v. 45. So also in Lev. 19:2 and 20:26, where the formula "Be ye holy, for I am holy" is placed at the beginning and at the end of a section containing various laws against fornication, adultery, incest, idolatry, and other like crimes. In Deut. 23:14, after the law for removing human filth out of the camp, the words are added: "For Jehovah, thy God, walketh in the midst of thy camp. . . . Wherefore let thy camp be holy, that He behold no unclean thing in thee and turn away from thee."

The holiness of God both in its transcendence and its moral purity is so complete and so dazzling that even the holy seraphim may not behold it, but cover their faces.

Three times the seraphim pronounce the Lord "holy." The Church has from ancient times seen in the triple "holy" an indication of the Holy Trinity. Standing alone, the passage does not, and cannot, prove the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. That is done by the *sedes doctrinae*. But once the doctrine is established, it is but natural to see in the *Trisagion* an indication of the fact of the three holy Persons in the one Jehovah of Hosts.

Jehovah is called "Jehovah of Hosts." The name "Jehovah," which is etymologically explained Ex. 3:14, designates God as the living, eternal, immutable One.⁹

The added designation "of Hosts" deserves some attention. The Hebrew *sebaotb* means armies. The Bible speaks in two senses

8. Laetsch, *l. c.*, p. 46.

9. For a discussion of the name "Jehovah" with special reference to Luther's explanation see Pieper, *op. cit.*, pp. 462 ff.

of "heavenly hosts" or "hosts of heaven." 1 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 18:18; Ps. 103:21; and 148:2 (cp. also Luke 2:13) the reference is to angels. Is. 34:4; 40:26; *et al.* the term signifies the heavenly bodies.

In the name "Jehovah of Hosts" reference is to the angels, who are Jehovah's armies and do His bidding. 1 Kings 22:19 ff.; Ps. 103:20-21; cp. also 2 Kings 6:17, where the horses and chariots of fire that surround Elisha cannot well represent anything but the heavenly hosts, that is, the angels.

Returning to our picture, Isaiah sees Jehovah of Hosts, the great, exalted Lord of heaven and earth, sitting upon His throne in heaven, surrounded by the seraphim and acclaimed by them in antiphonal praise as the Thrice Holy, the clean, the pure, separate from all manner of uncleanness, of whatever sort it be.

The seraphim add: "Full is the whole earth of His glory." This can hardly refer to His being glorified in all the earth by men, for the Lord complains bitterly in Isaiah 1 that not even in Israel, where above all other nations His glory might be expected to dwell, was He honored. "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider" (Ch. 1:3). Rather we must think here of the wonders of creation (Ps. 19:1 ff.) and of the works of God in His government of mankind. Cp. Num. 14:21-24.

The vision made a deep impression upon Isaiah. Delitzsch says: "The whole Book of Isaiah contains traces of the impression made by this ecstatic vision. The favorite name of God in the mouth of the Prophet, *viz.*, "the Holy One of Israel," . . . is the echo of this seraphic *sanctus*."¹⁰

The crying of the seraphim had a number of effects. The first effects to be described were upon the temple itself, in which the vision takes place. V. 4: "*And the foundations of the sills trembled from the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.*" The translation of *siphim* with "posts" by the A. V. is misleading. The word *saph*, as part of a building, means "sill, threshold." The sills on their part are laid on foundations called *ammoth*. The fact that the foundations of the sills trembled shows

10. Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, p. 192 f.

that the temple was shaken to its very foundations, not only in its superstructure, by the voice of the seraphim. Not terror on the part of the building, but the power of the voices of the seraphim is described. Furthermore, the house was filled with smoke. Some interpreters have thought of the cloud which filled the house of the Lord when the Ark of the Covenant had been placed in the Holy of Holies at the dedication of the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 8:10-11). Others have explained the smoke by a reference to Rev. 8:3-4, where the prayers of the saints come with the smoke of incense before God. So Stoeckhardt takes it. "Nach dem Zusammenhang, in welchem von dem Lobgesang der Seraphim und dessen maechtiger Wirkung die Rede ist, haben wir diesen Rauch als Weihrauch, als Sinnbild der Anbetung zu fassen. Und da kurz zuvor von der Offenbarung der Herrlichkeit Gottes auf Erden gesagt war, so sind mit dem Rauechwerk wohl, wie Apok. 5, 8; 8, 3, 4, die Gebete der Heiligen auf Erden gemeint. Die Menschen auf Erden, die da auch die Herrlichkeit Gottes sehen, vereinigen ihre Stimmen mit den Stimmen der Engel und geben sammt den heiligen Seraphim dem dreimal Heiligen Preis, Ehre und Anbetung."¹¹

The vision and the cry of the seraphim, which shook the heavenly temple to its foundations, also shook Isaiah, who beheld the scene in a prophetic vision, to his foundations. V. 5: "*And I said: Woe to me, because I am destroyed (damam: to be dumb, silent, Niphal, to be destroyed, to perish), for I am a man, unclean of lips, and in the midst of a people unclean of lips I dwell, for my eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of Hosts.*"

In direct contrast to Jehovah, who is holy, pure, clean, too pure even for the seraphim to view with unshaded eyes, stands Isaiah, who is a man "unclean of lips." We know nothing of the personal life of Isaiah before he was called to be a prophet. But in the presence of the Holy One he deeply feels his own uncleanness and that of the people among whom he dwells. Perhaps with the words of God to Moses: "Thou canst not see My face: for there shall no man see Me, and live" (Ex. 33:20) in mind, Isaiah cries

11. G. Stoeckhardt, *Der Prophet Jesaja*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo., p. 66.

out that he is destroyed. He must die because he has seen God. But the purpose of the vision was not Isaiah's destruction. V. 6: *"And there flew to me one of the seraphim; and in his hand a coal; with tongs he had taken it from off the altar."* The word *rispah*, which we have translated "coal," means also a hot stone, such as the ancients at times used for baking. However, since baking operations can hardly be thought of as being carried on at altars, we prefer to translate with the Septuagint and the Rabbins, "a coal."

With this coal *"he touched upon my mouth and said: Behold, this has touched thy lips, and thy iniquity has departed, and thy sin is covered"* (v. 7). The Prophet had lamented over unclean lips. It is his lips, therefore, that are touched with the coal from the altar for cleansing. Both verbs used for the forgiveness of sins are significant. The first, *sar*, means "to depart." When iniquity has been forgiven, it has departed, it is no longer with the sinner. The second, *tekhuppar*, means, literally, "it has been covered," therefore God no longer sees it or regards it.

It is significant that forgiveness and cleansing come to the Prophet from the altar. God has provided an altar on which forgiveness and cleansing may be found for all unclean lips and hearts and lives on earth, the Cross on which His only-begotten Son was sacrificed for the redemption of all mankind. (Heb. 13:10 ff.; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:10.) God, the perfectly Holy, who wants man to be holy, has provided a vicarious holiness for sinners through the altar of the Cross. And even as the seraph touched the lips of the Prophet with a coal from the altar and cleansed him, so God cleanses sinners with the blood of Christ. Then they need no longer tremble and despair at the sight, and even at the thought of the Thrice Holy, but may approach His throne with eagerness and confidence.

V. 8: *"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying: Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us? And I said: Behold me, send me!"* Here the purpose of the vision becomes apparent. Jehovah is seeking someone to send on a mission. And this time it is not to be one of the seraphim or of any other order of angels. He desires a *human* instrument. The Prophet has understood. And with a will-

ingness and confidence born of the consciousness that his sins are forgiven, he offers himself. "Behold me, send me!"

This is Isaiah's call to the prophetic office, which he is to exercise under four kings (Ch. 1:1). His message for the first is not to be the message of forgiveness, but a terrible message of Law and of doom, as the next verses show, but by and by he will be permitted also to extend to Israel those sweet Gospel messages which earn him the title "The Evangelist of the Old Testament."

Homiletic Use: If this text is used on Trinity Sunday, the preacher may, since the doctrine of the Trinity is not treated *ex professo* in the passage, briefly set forth the doctrine in its salient features in the introduction to the sermon on the basis of the *sedes doctrinae*, and then speak of the majesty and of the holiness of God in the body of the sermon. The following outline might be used:

Theme: Holy, Holy, Holy Is the Lord of Hosts!

- I. His holiness (transcendence and purity) is such that no creature can stand before Him.
 - A. The holy seraphim hide their faces, lest they see Him, and their feet, lest they offend the Holy One, v. 2.
 - B. Isaiah cries that he, a man of unclean lips, is undone for having seen Him, v. 5.
 - C. As for the rest of mankind, Mal. 3:2 applies.
- II. But the Thrice Holy Himself has prepared a cleansing, which enables sinners to stand before Him and to enter His service.
 - A. Vv. 6-7. The cleansing of the Prophet's lips with a coal from the altar.
The forgiveness of sins for all sinners through the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross.
 - B. V. 8. The Prophet's call and his joyous response.
The Christian's call to service in the Kingdom and his joyous response. _____

If a more general treatment is desired, the preacher may, in his introduction, show that agnostics maintain that God, if indeed there is a God, is unknown and unknowable. He may then show that

God has, in fact, revealed Himself to man from ancient times, that in these revelations of Himself He condescended to our frail human understanding, assuming human form (anthropomorphism). From here the preacher could lead over to the specific revelation of God in the text.

***Theme:* Behold Thy God!**

- I. As king of heaven and earth
- II. As the Holy One
- III. As the Savior of Sinners

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