

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Worship Series		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Mason Depew
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THE COURT OF THE KING OF KINGS

Introduction: Isaiah 6 may seem like a slightly odd passage to begin a series on Sunday worship. It is not explicitly or directly about the public worship of God's people, and of course it is in the Old Testament. To begin to really understand what we are doing when we worship, however, we must know the God who calls us to worship him. And such a vivid vision as this one from Isaiah will help us to realize the weight of what we are doing when we step into God's presence. If you meditate seriously on Isaiah 6, you will feel the truth of Hebrews 10:31 more strongly than ever: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

1. To understand any prophetic vision, you need to go over the details of the imagery with a fine-toothed comb. Thankfully, doing so is very rewarding, because instead of just thinking about God with abstract theological terms, you will feel you can grasp these truths about him more concretely. It is a lot like the old screenwriters' adage: "Show, don't tell." Isaiah is really showing us God here, rather than just telling us about him.
 - a. Isaiah 6:1 says that the Lord's throne is in the Temple, on the Ark of the Covenant itself. This is clear from the fact that the Ark was made with a "mercy seat" of pure gold, surrounded on either side by cherubim.¹ These features of its design clearly correspond with Isaiah's vision. He is seeing, as it were, the spiritual meaning behind the physical design of the Temple and the Ark. The Lord is enthroned in the midst of his people and receives their regular worship as tribute.
 - b. You might wonder why the Temple is so special if God is present everywhere. Although it is true that you encounter evidence for God throughout all of creation and gazing at the stars, for example, can feel like a spiritual experience,² God only *promised* to dwell with his people at the Temple. Even before he named Jerusalem as his special city,³ the Lord set the expectation that he would choose one particular location to dwell and receive Israel's worship.⁴ This is also why it was so important that the Lord's "seat" was on the Ark of the *Covenant*, indicating that the covenant contained inside was the foundation of Israel's

¹ "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be." - Exodus 25:17-20

² The stars certainly filled David with worshipful awe when he wrote Psalm 8:3-4, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" And 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."

³ "Since the day that I brought my people out of the land of Egypt, I chose no city out of all the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, that my name might be there, and I chose no man as prince over my people Israel; but I have chosen Jerusalem that my name may be there, and I have chosen David to be over my people Israel." - 2 Chronicles 6:5-6

⁴ "But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock." - Deuteronomy 12:5-6

relationship to God.⁵ Without that covenant, such a God as this would never live among such lowly subjects.

- c. What does it mean that the train of the Lord's robe fills the Temple? Monarchs wear extravagant clothing to show off their power and prestige. Look up pictures of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953 and you will see that she had to have someone to carry the train of her cape as she walked, because it was so long. The point is obviously not to be practical, but to impress, but no human monarch has ever worn a garment as majestic as the Lord's robe in Isaiah 6:1, filling the whole Temple! This is a vivid representation of the fact that his majesty is unmatched.
- d. Another important way that kings show off their status is with impressive servants. This is undoubtedly why Nebuchadnezzar wanted members of Judah's royal family to serve him in his court, for example.⁶ But no human king has ever had servants like the Lord's angels. In this case they are seraphim, with six wings each!
 - i. They cover their faces because even perfect angels cannot look directly at the face of God their Creator, much like we cannot stare directly at the Sun.⁷ Astronomers have to use special filters and reflectors to look at the Sun's spots because its light is just too powerful. Notice also that the way Isaiah describes the voice of the Lord in verse 8 sounds like he is not sure exactly where it is coming from, so he has not looked directly at the Lord either.⁸
 - ii. Similarly, they cover their feet because, particularly in an ancient culture where everyone wears sandals, feet are usually the filthiest part of your body. This is not literally true of the angels of course, but this part of the vision represents that even the holiest creatures cannot be too careful in the Lord's presence. It may also suggest that if they were to land on the earth, the corruption of the Fall would taint them, and they would have to be washed before they could worship the Lord again.
 - iii. Their voices are also extremely impressive, communicating great authority. It is striking how several prophets make special mention of the power of an angel's voice, especially Daniel.⁹ This is because the angels speak for the Creator, whose speech formed all of creation and can just as easily shake heaven and earth to their foundations.¹⁰

⁵ "And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel." - Exodus 25:21-22. In this passage it is called the ark of the testimony because the tablets inside testify to the substance of the covenant.

⁶ "Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans." - Daniel 1:3-4

⁷ As John Calvin says in his commentary on this verse, "The two wings with which they cover their face show plainly enough that even angels cannot endure God's brightness, and that they are dazzled by it in the same manner as when we attempt to gaze upon the radiance of the sun. And if angels are overwhelmed by the majesty of God, how great will be the rashness of men if they venture to intrude so far! Let us, therefore, learn that our inquiries concerning God ought never to go beyond what is proper and lawful, that our knowledge may soberly and modestly taste what is far above our capacity. And yet the angels do not cover their face in such a manner as not to be favored with beholding God in some degree; for their flight is not at random. In like manner we too ought to look at God, but only so far as our capacity shall enable us."

⁸ "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'" Notice he doesn't describe it as directly as the angels calling to each other in verse 3. It appears that Isaiah knew this voice was from the Lord by the sound of it, not because he saw a mouth moving. Compare this with Numbers 7:89, where Moses hears the voice of the Lord coming from above the Ark, as well as Deuteronomy 4:12b, "You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice."

⁹ "His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude." - Daniel 10:6

¹⁰ "At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.'" - Hebrews 12:26

2. Perhaps the most important line in this vision, that encapsulates everything else, is when the angels call the Lord, “holy, holy, holy.” The late R.C. Sproul devoted the second chapter of one of his most well-known books, *The Holiness of God*, to explaining Isaiah 6, and this phrase in particular. He notes that the Bible repeats words and phrases for emphasis, but only repeats one attribute of God three times in this way: “The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of His glory.”¹¹
- a. The holiness of God is so special because it refers to his complete uniqueness and transcendence above all creatures. We as human beings made in his image share in most of God’s attributes in one way or another. There is an *analogy* between our love and God’s love, between our knowledge and his, between our justice and his, etc. Even unbelievers who refuse to acknowledge the Lord show some measure of these things.¹² But holiness belongs innately to the Lord *alone*.
 - b. Someone might object to this by pointing out that many creatures and inanimate objects are called holy in the Bible. That is true, but they are called holy because they are closer to God than other things of their same nature. For example, Israel is called a holy nation because they live in a special covenant with God that other nations do not share. The tribe of Levi is called holy because they have special duties in the Temple that the other tribes of Israel do not share. The bread, the altars, the lampstand, and other objects in the temple are not called holy because of something special *in themselves*, but because they are closer to God than other, similar things. These things are only holy inasmuch as they bask in his presence and his holiness rubs off on them. The degree to which something is holy is the degree to which it is set apart as sacred for God’s purposes, in contrast to the common, profane things of this world.
 - c. Holiness is dangerous to unholy people and things. One of my professors in seminary, Joshua Van Ee, liked to compare the priests of Levi to nuclear safety technicians working in a power plant. They are in charge of maintaining the rules and regulations around the plant so that the incredible, overwhelming power housed within doesn’t burst out and incinerate everything for miles around. This is strikingly similar to the way the Lord talks about his presence in the Temple, in light of Israel’s many sins.¹³
 - i. The layout of the Temple is designed to be a reminder of this, with its three main areas leading to the inner sanctum, the “Holy of Holies.” Each of the three areas was more dangerous than the last, with only the high priest being allowed to enter the Holy of Holies on one day each year, the Day of Atonement. The story of the rope being attached to his leg to drag him back out may be just a legend, but there is a good reason it seems so plausible! The Holy of Holies really was an extremely dangerous place for

¹¹ Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 25.

¹² “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.” - Romans 2:14-15

¹³ The Lord sometimes warns the Israelites about his power “breaking out” against them to destroy them if they cross the wrong line. This starts in Exodus 19, when God warns Moses that only he and Aaron, the first high priest, can come near, “But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he **break out** against them.” - 19:24. Similarly, the Lord also warns them after the golden calf incident that he will consume them like a fire for their sins if he stays with them: “‘Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I **consume** you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.’ When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.” - 33:3-4

- any sinner, and the high priests of Israel were only exceptions if they carefully followed the Lord's sanctifying instructions.¹⁴
- ii. Uzziah himself, the king who died in the same year Isaiah had this vision, tried to enter the Temple. This was not his role because he was not a priest, but he did it anyway, ignoring all the safety warnings and going too close to the core, as it were. He was punished for this insubordination with leprosy and cut off from his people until his death.¹⁵
 - iii. In the same section quoted above, Sproul goes on to say, "A recent survey of people who used to be church members revealed that the main reason they stopped going to church was that they found it boring."¹⁶ We have all heard people say or imply similar things, but how can the voice which shook the foundations of the Temple fail to move us? Because *our dull hearts fail* to grasp him by faith! We expect him to appear visually and audibly to us, but worship wasn't like this every Sabbath, even for Isaiah. Ordinarily, he would have to *believe* the Lord is present, even when he did not *feel* it so powerfully.
- d. Knowing about Uzziah's death is probably a big part of why Isaiah reacts to this vision with despair in verse 5. He is expecting to be ruined the way Uzziah was, because he knows he is unclean, and the Jews are soon to be judged by God with the Exile. It is likely that Isaiah focuses on his unclean lips because he has been called as a prophet, to speak for God, but now feels how small and ridiculous he is as a messenger compared to the glorious angels.
- i. But what does he find instead of wrath? That the seat of mercy really is a throne where God dispenses mercy *for those who are contrite*. After Isaiah's cry of dismay, one of the seraphim cleanses Isaiah's lips with a hot coal from the altar (on which the high priest would make the annual atonement). Now, by the grace of God, Isaiah is justified and fit to be a herald for the King of Kings.¹⁷
 - ii. In gratitude for this atonement, Isaiah is filled with enthusiasm to be the prophet of his great and merciful God. He answers the call of duty with no hesitation in verse 8. He is going to need to remember the zeal he felt from this vision when he is delivering God's message, because it is first and foremost about judgement. The people of Israel have not confessed their sins like Isaiah did here. They are going to be cut off, like Uzziah their king.

¹⁴ "And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, **so that he does not die.**" - Leviticus 16:12-13

¹⁵ "And they [the priests] withstood King Uzziah and said to him, 'It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God.' Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the LORD had struck him. And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD. And Jotham his son was over the king's household, governing the people of the land. Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz wrote." - 2 Chronicles 26:18-22

¹⁶ Sproul, 25.

¹⁷ Notice how similar the contrast between Uzziah and Isaiah is to the difference between the pharisee and tax collector in Christ's famous parable: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." - Luke 18:10-14. Uzziah thought he was special and deserved to be in God's presence but was rejected, whereas Isaiah confessed his sin and was shown great mercy.

3. There are several important things we should learn from this text regarding how we approach God in worship. The New Testament tells us that the Church is now the new Temple of God, not confined to any particular building, but with the worshipers themselves assembling as the building blocks.¹⁸ This means we need to take our regular gathering for worship extremely seriously!
 - a. If we do not feel impressed with Sunday morning worship, that is our failing, not God's. If we could see with our eyes what is going on invisibly at each one of our worship services, it would look just like Isaiah's vision and not one of us would be bored. Some would run screaming in terror and others would collapse under the weight of the burning glory of God, but no one would be bored. Therefore, if you struggle to pay attention, pray for greater faith to see, as it were, what's really going on.
 - b. Treat the Call to Worship as a call like Isaiah's in 6:8. Not that God is calling us to the same job as Isaiah, but it is the same God doing the calling and worship is just as holy a mission. In fact, bringing worshipers to himself is the reason God sends out prophets!¹⁹ Ask yourself this: if you really believed worship was a sacred calling, what would you change about the way you and your family go about Sunday morning? Or even Saturday evening? Would you stay up as late? Would you lose track of time and come late as often as you do, if you believed this was your ultimate purpose in life? Remember that worship is the main thing we know for certain that we will be doing forever in the New Creation!²⁰
 - c. To worship well, we must leave our pride at the door. Come with contrition for your sins, not arrogance, which adds sin on top of sin in his presence. You cannot receive mercy if you think you are already good enough to be in God's presence.
4. The mercy we receive is only because we have a great High Priest, more righteous and gracious than Aaron or any of his offspring ever was. This High Priest does not need to ritually sanctify himself again and again because he radiates holiness from his own person, and ministers to us out of his own indestructible life. The sacrifice he offers to atone for us is his own body and blood, broken and poured out on the Cross. And he has not just entered into the earthly Temple that Isaiah saw, but heaven itself to be our advocate with the Father.²¹ As soon as his sacrifice was made, and the way to that heavenly throne room was open, the curtain in the Temple was torn because the earthly Holy of Holies was now obsolete.²² Considering that Jesus Christ has done all of this to open the way to enter into God's presence, do we still dare to consider it insignificant or boring? May it never be!

¹⁸ In 1 Corinthians 3:10, Paul refers to his work in planting the Corinthian church as laying a foundation, like a skilled builder by the grace of God. Then he makes it clear that this building, the Corinthian church, is a temple of the living God: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." - 3:16-17. Note also that the word for "you" in Greek here is plural, so he does not mean the Corinthians are individual temples, but that they are bricks in a temple when they gather together. Compare this with Ephesians 2:19-22, where he says almost exactly the same things to the Ephesians.

¹⁹ The very first thing Moses and Aaron say to Pharaoh, for example, is to call the Israelites out for a worship feast: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" - Exodus 5:1

²⁰ "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will **worship** him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for **the Lord God will be their light**, and they will reign forever and ever." - Revelation 22:3-5

²¹ "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." - Hebrews 7:25-26

²² "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split." - Matthew 27:50-51