

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. I’m not planning to preach on every single verse, because the book is 66 chapters and 1292 verses long and there are many themes that repeat themselves. But this prophetic book is central to the Biblical story and very relevant to our lives today, despite being over 2500 years old. In fact, after Psalms, Isaiah is referenced in the New Testament more often than any other book. So I pray and believe that God would reveal Himself in deeper ways to you as we look at Isaiah.

Before we begin, let me set some of the context. Whenever you read the Bible, if you truly want to understand its meaning, you have to pay attention to context, including the grammatical, literary and historical contexts. From a historical perspective, Isaiah prophesied from about 740-687 BC. At that time, Assyria is the main power in the Near East, and Israel is facing invasion and exile, not just because Assyria is bigger and stronger but as God’s discipline for their sinful idolatry and injustice. Because of Israel’s sin, God has raised up Isaiah to be a prophet. Prophets were people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt.

This morning, we are going to read Isaiah 6, an encounter that Isaiah has with God that leads to the commissioning that God will give him. As we consider what this passage means, I believe we are going to see in this encounter three aspects of the holy love of God that we all desperately need, whether or not we realize it.

Isaiah 6:1–13 - In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “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.” ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” ⁹ He said, “Go and tell this people: “ ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever

seeing, but never perceiving.’ ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” ¹¹ Then I said, “For how long, Lord?” And he answered: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, ¹² until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. ¹³ And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

There are not many passages in the Bible that pull back the curtain and show us a picture of the throne room of God, the presence of the Almighty, but this vision in Isaiah 6 is one of them. And in Isaiah’s encounter with God, we see something about the holy love of God that you and I and everyone in this world desperately needs, whether or not we are aware of it. You can summarize this encounter in four movements:

Isaiah’s vision of a holy God

Isaiah’s response

God’s forgiveness and cleansing of Isaiah

God’s commissioning of Isaiah

1) Isaiah’s vision of a holy God.

Isaiah 6:1–13 - In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “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.”

In Isaiah’s vision, he sees God seated on his throne. Although God is spirit and has no physical body, it is clear from the description that God’s glorious presence fills the room. God is surrounded by angels called seraphs, who because of the holiness, the majesty, and the glory of God, need extra wings just to cover their eyes and feet. And the angels are crying to one another: “Holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Now, I wasn’t there, but I would venture to say that this is not a

monotone “holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of his glory” but an awe-inspired cry. Do you see how glorious God is? How beautiful? How incredible? Do you see His glory? Can you see how every part of creation reflects His glory?

What is the holiness of God? The best book on this subject is R.C. Sproul’s *The Holiness of God*, from which I will draw a lot of insight today. The word holy, or holiness, is used in different ways throughout Scripture. At times it is describing *purity or sinlessness*, at other times it emphasizes *separateness or otherness* and at other times it is about *transcendence*, that God or something is a different class of being or object.

A good summary would be that God’s holiness means that **God is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection**. He is not like us. He is perfect in every way, on a whole other level.

You might think of a specific event in the life of Jesus and the disciples that illustrates just how our God is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection:

Matthew 8:23–27 - Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him.

²⁴ Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” ²⁶ He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. ²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

What kind of man is this? There is something different, something “other” about Him that frightens us – even more than the storm! God is holy. Jesus is holy. He is not like us. He is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection.

In Isaiah 6, we see the angels calling to one another, “**Holy, holy, holy.**” In Jewish literature, if you wanted to emphasize something, you did not use bold or italics, but repetition. God’s holiness is the only attribute repeated in triplicate. He is not “love, love, love” or “just, just, just,” but “holy, holy, holy.” This is the attribute above all other attributes that describes our God. He is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection.

It’s ironic, isn’t it? These days, in our desire to make God relevant, we can be guilty of minimizing His otherness and His majesty. We want to make God approachable, understandable, relatable. We want to reduce God and His Holy

Word to another self-help manual. But when we minimize His otherness and majesty, we lose His holiness, the fundamental thing that makes God God, the aspect of His character that we desperately need.

Isaiah sees all of this, and what is his response?

In verse 5: “Woe to me!” I cried. “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.”

Isaiah sees a vision of the holiness of God, the glory of God, and recognizes how filthy he is, and he feels like he is coming apart at the seams. I think you can categorize this response into three instinctual emotions that Isaiah experiences:

1) Guilt

Isaiah experiences guilt before a holy, perfect God whom he has offended and who has the right and power to kill him on the spot.

Consider what R.C. Sproul wrote about Isaiah:

“If ever there was a man of integrity, it was Isaiah ben Amoz. He was a whole man, a together type of a fellow. He was considered by his contemporaries as the most righteous man in the nation. He was respected as a paragon of virtue. Then he caught one sudden glimpse of a holy God. In that single moment, all of his self-esteem was shattered. In a brief second he was exposed, made naked beneath the gaze of the **absolute standard of holiness**. As long as Isaiah could compare himself to other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his own character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was destroyed- morally and spiritually annihilated. He was undone. He came apart. His sense of integrity collapsed.”

Even a good man, this prophet of God, when face to face with the holiness of God, comes undone as he realizes just how sinful he is. Notice that he refers to his lips, that he is a man of unclean lips. Why his lips? Because he was a prophet. Even the most holy thing about him was like filthy rags. They were unclean. **On the day I was baptized, I had a similar experience, realizing that even the most religious things about me were so stained with self-centeredness and a desire for self-glory. You can not clean yourself up to make yourself acceptable to God.** Before a holy God you would be undone. All you can do is confess your guilt.

Consider again the words of Sproul:

“[A]s fearsome as death is, it is nothing compared with meeting a holy God. When we encounter Him, the totality of our creatureliness breaks upon us and shatters the myth that we have believed about ourselves, the myth that we are demigods, junior-grade deities who will try to live forever. ... When we meet the Absolute, we know immediately that we are not absolute. When we meet the Infinite, we become acutely conscious that we are finite. When we meet the Eternal, we know we are temporal. To meet God is a powerful study in contrasts.”

To see God is His holiness is to realize that all this time you have been fooling yourself. You thought you were independent, making your own decisions and doing what you want. But now you realize that you would not take your next breath apart from the permission of the God who reigns over everything. Or maybe you think of it this way. You can be an athlete, living under the illusion that you are a really talented wrestler or gymnast or soccer player. But what happens when you come up against a real professional? You are exposed as an amateur, a pretender. Your pride is destroyed. Or what if you consider yourself a beautiful or stylish person, taking great pride in your appearance? What happens when you run into someone truly beautiful and stylish? Or what if you consider yourself a virtuous person, and then you meet someone who lives on pennies and gives their life in service to the least of these? What if you consider yourself a praying person and then you meet someone who spends hours a day in passionate prayer? It's Salieri meeting Mozart, or Professor Lambeau meeting Will Hunting.

This is what happens to Isaiah times a million. And this is what happens when we come to understand the holiness of our God. His holiness exposes us as the frauds we are, and we come undone. Our pride and self-esteem are destroyed, and we feel ruined, reduced to nothing.

2) Shame

Isaiah is exposed before the all-seeing gaze of a holy God and he is ashamed.

Think about it this way. Have you ever been caught doing something that you were trying to keep private? Some private sin, or a lie or deception? Can you remember the shame you felt as your private stuff was exposed to the light of day and the gaze of another? Or, if that's never happened, what if all of your innermost

thoughts and feelings and all of the worst things you had ever done were all of a sudden put on the screen behind me? How would you feel?

Hebrews 4:13 - Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

In the presence of the holy, perfect, all-seeing God, Isaiah experiences the worst aspects of himself exposed to the light, to God's penetrating eyes, and he is metaphorically dying of the shame.

3) Terror

Overcome by guilt and shame, Isaiah is deathly afraid that the God who he has offended will destroy him.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "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. " Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

After Isaiah's confession, the angel takes a live coal, the fire of God from the altar, with tongs. Isaiah must have anticipated that his death was imminent. After all, the fire of God up to that point had always been associated with judgment. The fire of God. I'm a goner.

Add those three elements together – the guilt that Isaiah feels as a sinner before a holy God who has the absolute right to condemn him and demand his life; the shame he feels as everything that is wrong about him is exposed before the eyes of Him who sees everything; and the terror of being in the presence of the one who could squash him like a bug in an instant – and you can understand how his reaction is one of instinctive ruin. He is coming undone by the shame and the guilt, in terror at the just judgment and condemnation that he is surely about to receive, and crippled by the penetrating light of God's holiness. Woe to me, I am ruined.

You may have never had such a powerful encounter with God, but like it or not, this is your condition before a holy God. You stand guilty before the perfect One whom you have offended and who has the absolute right to condemn you to Hell. You are exposed in shame before the one who see everything you have ever done and knows everything you have ever thought. And even if you don't feel it, this

combination, if you were to experience it as Isaiah did, would leave you in terror for your life, with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

There is a reason that when God truly shows up in the Bible, people often fall on their face or fall down as if they are dead. As Annie Dillard put it in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

3) God’s forgiveness and cleansing of Isaiah

But in the rest of the chapter, in God’s response to Isaiah’s terror, we see the holy love of God that we need so desperately:

1) Forgiving love

Isaiah 6:5-7 - “Woe to me!” I cried. “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.” ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah, in the light of God’s holiness, experiences overwhelming guilt and shame. He confesses his complete unworthiness. And then the angel takes a live coal, the fire of God from the altar, with tongs. But instead of killing Isaiah, God forgives him. Cleanses him. Atones for his sin.

We are guilty, and God has the right to condemn, but in response to Isaiah’s confession, and to ours, He forgives.

1 John 1:8-9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Period. End of sentence. Even though we are completely guilty before a holy God, He forgives us in His love because of Jesus's death on the cross for our sins.

John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 5:6–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Hebrews 10:10 - And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Isaiah's story in chapter 6 is the story of all who have been saved, all who know Jesus. Our guilt and shame has been exposed before a holy God, the one against whom we have rebelled. But in response to our confession, our sin is put on Jesus, and we are forgiven, received, loved, and made holy.

2) Purifying love

Isaiah 6:5-7 - "Woe to me!" I cried. "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." ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

He is not only forgiven, he is cleansed. He is purified.

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

God takes away our guilt and our shame. God's love is a love that not only forgives but purifies us, transforms us, makes us better people.

Ephesians 5:25–27 - Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with

water through the word,²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

This is how God loves us through Christ, through the self-giving, sacrificial love of Christ that melts our hearts, woos us away from self-centeredness and sin, and gives us a new heart and new motivation, to know and honor Him more.

Titus 2:11–12 - For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age

4) God's commissioning of Isaiah

3) Empowering love

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”⁹ He said, “Go and tell this people: ““Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.”

¹⁰ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”¹¹ Then I said, “For how long, Lord?” And he answered: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,¹² until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.¹³ And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

Isaiah is forgiven, cleansed, and then empowered by God to be His prophet. God says that He needs someone to go for Him, and Isaiah signs up before He even knows what it is. Transformed by His love, He is willing to do whatever His holy and loving and merciful God wants. And so, Isaiah is commissioned and sent out to speak the words of God to the people of Israel. And even though the people will reject him, and they will be disciplined, there is a seed in the stump, and there will be hope for the future beyond the exile.

Not only does God in His love forgive us and purify us, but in His grace, He chooses to make us part of the good thing He is doing in this world, filling us with His Holy Spirit and empowering us to make a difference in the lives of others for His kingdom's sake. In His service, everything we do will matter eternally.

In Isaiah 6, we see a picture of the forgiving and purifying and empowering love that we so desperately need. Isaiah is completely exposed before the God who sees everything and has every right to punish him. And yet, he forgives him and cleanses him and empowers him.

Think about the dilemma we so often face in our relationships. We long to be seen, to be known fully, and to be completely loved for who we are. But we are afraid that if people truly knew who we were – our past, our thoughts, our behaviors – they would reject us. And so we are forced to choose between sharing only part of ourselves and living with a love that doesn't truly cover the worst parts of us, or sharing everything and risking rejection.

This is the plot of so many romantic movies. Girl meets guy. They fall in love. But girl has a secret. She's not really a princess, or her interest in him is part of a dare, or she has something else that she is hoping the boy does not find out. And things are really great for a while. But eventually he finds out. And it seems that everything is falling apart and the relationship is over. But then he realizes that he does love her, even with her secret. And they both live happily ever after.

Now think carefully. There is a reason that plotline is used so often, because it touches on something very true about us. I think it tells us that we have a deep-seated fear that if people really knew us, if the truth about us were exposed, they would reject us. If they really knew what we thought, what we desire, what we have done, then they would be horrified and run screaming from us. I think it tells us that one of our deepest desires is that someone perfect and beautiful would know us completely, including all our faults and flaws, and still choose to love us and never reject us. But we are afraid that is impossible. And so most of us hide our faults and flaws. And although we may get someone to love us, deep down we know that they don't love the real us, just the parts that we are brave enough to share. Or, maybe we are completely honest, and in the process we scare people away. I mean, just think about social media. We criticize it for being a place where people present curated versions of themselves, only putting forward the best parts. But when someone is brutally honest, it tends to be really awkward.

I think the movies we love tell us something true, that we long for someone perfect and beautiful to see us and know us completely, with all our faults and brokenness, and to not reject us but to choose us, to love us, to show us unending grace, and by their love to purify us, cleanse us, transform us into someone better, to empower us to live life with meaning and purpose. But outside of the movies, no human being can perfectly do that. But there is a story that these stories point to, there is one

who perfectly fulfills that desire of our heart. There is one who is perfect and beautiful in every way. And He does know us completely, with all our faults and brokenness, better than we even know ourselves. And in the light of His holiness, in His presence, we come undone, as we recognize ourselves for the frauds we are, the pretenders, the broken and hopeless sinners who can not redeem themselves. But in His presence, as we confess our unworthiness to Him, we find the forgiving and cleansing and empowering love that our hearts have been longing for.

As Jesus promised:

Matthew 5:3 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

As Tim Keller put it in *The Meaning of Marriage*:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.”

Many of us think we want someone who thinks we are perfect just the way we are. But what our hearts truly need and long for is to be known completely and loved perfectly, with a love that not only accepts all of our flaws and weaknesses and fears and anxieties **but heals them** as they are brought into the light and met not with rejection but with grace. **Think about it: what would it look like to truly confess to someone you love and to be met with grace**, with love, with forgiveness, with commitment and loyalty and an “I am with you and I am for you”? It would liberate us from fear and pretense. We don’t need to pretend to be better than we are. It humbles us out of our self-righteousness. We don’t need to justify ourselves in order to feel okay. We don’t need to look down on others to feel better about ourselves. I can be completely honest and transparent about my weaknesses and sins, because honesty and ceasing self-justification is the way to true healing and peace, thanks to the death of the Servant.

1 John 4:18 - There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

To be fully known and fully loved is what our hearts long for. **This life-transforming grace does not say “you’re perfect just the way you are, don’t ever**

change” but “you are far from perfect, but you are loved with a perfect love that can perfect you and give your life meaning.”

On the cross, Jesus bore the wrath of the Father on sin that Isaiah deserved and that we deserve. Because of His love for us, we are forgiven. We are cleansed. We are empowered. We are fully known and completely loved, with a love that not only forgives but cleanses, transforms, and empowers us to become a part of God’s work in this world, to love and to use the gifts He has given us to transform this world into the kingdom of God.