

Holy, holy, holy, the angels cry! "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory." And with the angels' song and Isaiah's reaction to what he sees, we learn something today about who God is, about who he is as the most holy above all things. And so we want to focus today on our Old Testament reading, so that we can learn what it means for God to be holy.

Because we can call kinds of things holy, Christians. We can call things holy. We can call ourselves holy. We can call God holy. Holiness just means that we are separate, that we are distinct, that we are different from everything else. So whether we're talking about things or people or God, we're talking about being different when we talk about holiness. But when it comes to God, Christians, God is different. God is unique. God is holy in a way above all other things. God is the most holy one, because there is none like him in all of creation. He is the holy Lord, and beside him there is no other.

And Isaiah gets a little tiny glimpse of that in his vision for today, because he says that he saw the Lord seated upon a throne, high and lifted up. He saw the Lord in his glory before him. And the hem of his robe, the very bottom of his garments, was enough to fill the entire temple. Now, the temple was not a small building, Christians. It was hundreds of feet long. And so for God's hem, the very bottom of his robes, to fill that entire space and more shows just how great the Lord is in comparison with his creation. God is far above all things as the most holy creator.

And unfortunately the words that we might use to describe him are never going to come close enough to really tell us who God is. That's why Isaiah, for example, doesn't really tell us what God looks like. He tells us he sees him sitting. He tells us he's on a throne. He tells us he can see the hem of his robe. But that's it. No other description is given of the Lord. Because our words are inadequate to really fully describe who God is. We still want to say something about him, because he has revealed all of these things to us so that we can know something about the Lord.

Isaiah says that he saw standing above the Lord what he calls the seraphim. These are the angels who are his servants, the angels who are attending on the Lord. And they're terrifying creatures. Because "seraph" in Hebrew means "fiery." It means burning. So the seraphim are the "burning ones," the angels who appear like fire. And these terrifying creatures are described as having six wings. Two of which cover their face, because they cannot bear to look at the face of God. Two of which cover their feet, which is probably the Bible's way of saying covering the rest of their body, because they want to hide themselves from the vision of the Lord. And with two of their wings they fly, because they are carrying out God's will, going here and there quickly to do what God wants them to do. But as these terrifying, burning creatures are flying about, Isaiah hears them singing, singing back-and-forth, one calling and another responding, the way that we sing our introit or the way that we speak our psalms. And they are crying out, praising the Lord and saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory." They're saying it so loudly that the very foundations of the temple, those giant stones which make up its base, are shaking, because they are proclaiming the glory of the Lord in that place.

But what do they mean exactly when they say, "holy, holy, holy"? Because that's not just poetic. They don't say just because it sounds pretty. They mean something by it. They say, "Holy, holy, holy," because God is the most holy of all things. Because usually when we want to describe

something, Christians, especially when we're comparing one thing to another, and if something is greater than another, we will usually say that it is "very" something. So if we have something big and something bigger, we'll say that the second thing is very big. Or if we have something hot and something which is hotter, we'll say that the second thing is very hot. That's how our language works. That's how we describe things. But not every language does that. Sometimes when they're comparing things, there are languages that will just repeat themselves. So instead of saying "very big," for example, they will say that it is "big big." Or if something is very hot, for example, they will not say that it's "very hot." They will say that it is "hot hot." That's how they describe it. And Hebrew does the same thing from time to time. Think of the holy of holies, for example, inside the temple itself. It is the "holy holy" place because there is nothing else like it. It is holier than everything else. Everything else in the world is nothing in comparison with the holy of holies. But if the holy of holies is holy, then God who is "holy, holy, holy" is holy beyond measure! He is one who is far greater than our words have the ability to express. There is nothing like him in all creation. Nothing even comes close to becoming holy as he is holy.

And this holiness, Christians, is who he is. It's who he is as God. It's what makes him God in comparison with us. So that everything that we can say about him, no matter how inadequate it may be, will tell us something about the holiness of God. God is holy because he is almighty. The one who can do all things, the one who has all power in heaven and on earth. There is nothing that is too hard for the Lord. He can do whatever he wants. God is holy because he is limitless. God has no boundaries. God has no dimensions. This whole universe, as unimaginably huge as it is, is too small to be able to contain the Lord, because he is greater than all things. God is holy because he is eternal. God does not have a beginning. God will never have an end. There was never a time when God did not exist, and there never will be a time when he does not exist. God is outside of all time, so that he doesn't experience time in minutes and hours and days and weeks like we do. It's all the same to him, because he created time, and he is our Creator. God is holy because he is perfect. There is no blemish in him. There is no sin in him. Everything that he does is good and righteous and perfect and holy, because he is the almighty Lord. God is holy because he is our Creator. Everything comes from him. Nothing exists which did not come from his creative power. And everything continues to exist because he is the Lord. If he wanted to right now, and decided that nothing else should exist, we wouldn't be here longer than the blink of an eye, because we depend on him as our Creator for all things. God is holy because he is unapproachable. He dwells in unapproachable light. We cannot come to him and be in his presence, because he is so different from us. There will always be this distinction between us and him, because he is God and we are not. And we never will be. But above all Christians, God is holy because of the greatest mystery about God of all. And that is that he is holy because he is the Most Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three Persons, three distinct Persons, and yet one God. It's a mystery we cannot comprehend. It's a mystery we will never really be able to fully understand. But it is a mystery that God has revealed to us, because he is the Trinity, the one who has created us and the one who is holy above all things. So God is holy, Christians, because he is God, because he is above all things.

And notice how the angels react to him. The angels themselves hide their eyes from him. They dare not look into the face of God. And they're not hiding themselves because they're ashamed. They're not hiding themselves because they are sinners, because they never sinned. The angels don't have guilt. The angels have no reason to hide because of sin. And yet they still hide,

because these sinless creatures cannot bear to look into the face of God. To stand in God's presence is to fear him, and that fear and that awe is something that will go on even into eternity, even when we are no longer capable of sinning. Because God is the Lord and we are not.

But Christians, that fear turns into terror when we approach the Lord in our sin. Isaiah himself becomes very much aware of how much of a sinner he is in the presence of God, so that he cries out: "Woe is me! For I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Even that small glimpse of the glory of God, even that small glimpse of his holiness is enough for Isaiah to realize that he is condemned, that he is a sinner in the presence of God. Because God is so righteous, God is so pure, God is so holy, that everything else in comparison feels dirty. Everything else in comparison feels so unholy. Have you ever been to a party, for example, where you felt overdressed or underdressed? Or maybe you just felt out of place somewhere? That's the same feeling, but magnified an infinite number of times, because in the presence of God, our sin condemns us. If we had nothing else to hold on to, we would be destroyed. Because God's holiness is such that it cannot stand the presence of sin. It cannot stand the existence of evil.

But Christians, God is a God of love. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster. God does not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he turn from his wicked way and live. That's why God sends to Isaiah one of the seraphim, holding in his hand a coal from the holy fire of the temple. And with that coal, the angel touches his lips and says to him, "Behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." In the very place that Isaiah could feel his sin, that is, his lips, the angel touches him, and his sin is taken away. Isaiah is forgiven in that moment, so that he can now stand before the Lord. And he can sing the Lord's praises, because his lips have been cleansed and his sins forgiven.

Christians, God does the same thing for you. But he doesn't send an angel with a coal to do it. He sends his Son, Jesus Christ, carrying not a coal in his own hand, but his own blood. And with that blood, he has touched your lips, and he has taken away your sin and atoned your guilt. With that blood, you are forgiven, so that we do not have to be terrified in the presence of God. God has brought us to himself, so that we can stand before him forever. Jesus has made us pure, so that we can stand before God and sing his praises with the angels, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!"

But God has also made you holy, Christians, to be like himself. Not holy in exactly the same way he is holy, because we will never be like God. But he has made you like himself, so that you are his holy people. You've been taken out of the world, separated unto God. And you have been shown what is right, so that in everything that we do as Christians, we are doing what God would have us do. We are holy because God is holy. We are righteous because God is righteous. We are doing whatever God would have us do, because we have been forgiven in Jesus Christ.

So tremble before him, Christians. Tremble at the presence of God. He is your Creator. And we will fear him even into all eternity, because he is the holy God. But come before him as his holy

people, because he has made you holy by his Son, so that in all things you will be like him, to sing his praises forever.

Let us pray. O God, the Most Holy Trinity, we give you thanks this day for all the things that you have done for us, especially for forgiving us our sins through the work of Jesus Christ. We glorify you for all that you are and all that you have done, for you live and reign as the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.