

Sunday, February 10, 2019 – Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
“A Holy Privilege”

Isaiah 6: 1-8

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV
Central Image – Single Focus

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Ever feel way underdressed? Years ago in San Francisco we got off our boat from Alcatraz at 9pm and were starving after a day of being tourists. We were hungry verging on hangry – and wanted something high quality. The problem was our dress – we were dressed for miles of walking but the restaurant we chose was fancy. Every man in the place was wearing a suit – usually you scan the room and see at least a polo or turtleneck but not this place. I'd been walking around all day and had been wearing sneakers, jeans, a sweatshirt and a baseball hat, my hair all messy underneath. While the restaurant served us, I was self-conscious about my dress. Other places could have been more discriminating, and refused me entrance because of my dress.

Establishments hold to dress codes in order to set themselves apart – by holding to standards, a statement is made about specialness of the occasion, about the respect one holds for the place and for the people there. Places that hold to those standards are generally considered “nice,” and the dress denotes quality and class that sets it apart from other places.

That restaurant in San Francisco's got nothing on Isaiah's situation. He finds himself in the throne room of Yahweh, almighty God of the universe. If God is holy, it means He is set apart – altogether different, better, on a completely different level. That's what it means to be holy. It's an understatement to say that Isaiah is not appropriate for the occasion.

Listen to this description – Isaiah sees Yahweh Himself, sitting on His throne, high and exalted. The hem of His robe flowed behind Him and all around the room. Around him are seraphs – fiery angels, singing praises to God. These angels get it, they are appropriate to their occasion – covering their eyes and their feet in modesty and in reverence to the Holy God. It's amazing really – they themselves are holy creatures, they are unblemished by sin – and still, they do not dare to gaze upon the face of God,

because He is so special, so set apart, so holy. The very words they cry out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is full of His glory.” The temple shook and was filled with smoke – these things happen in the presence of God. God appeared as in a pillar of smoke, leading the people through the desert. God’s presence was as smoke in the tent where He met with Moses. The earth shook as Jesus died on the cross, and as the stone rolled away from the tomb. Talk about overkill! This is holiness at almost gaudy levels, in bright neon all around. There can be no mistaking it – Isaiah is in the most holy, the most set apart, the most exclusive place imaginable! The fanciest place you’ve ever seen or heard of has nothing on this.

Taking in these sights – these set apart, holy, terrific and terrifying sights, it’s hard to even see Isaiah, isn’t it? Look at him, in your mind’s eye. Isn’t he looking rather insignificant, almost invisible, blotted out by the bright light of the glory of God, obscured by the smoke, inaudible through the praise of the seraphim. He scans the room and knows he doesn’t belong. “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!” He is lost – some translations say ruined, or destroyed – why? Isaiah is a man of unclean lips and His people also have unclean lips. Sin comes from Isaiah’s mouth. He does not fit with the holiness all around Him – yes, Isaiah may seem insignificant but He knows that His sin stands in stark contrast to the standard of purity and holiness in God’s throne room. He doesn’t belong! He’ll surely be bounced, or worse, destroyed! He’s an invader, a sinner in God’s presence.

You and I are right when we call God our Father. We are right when we say that we are His children, that He loves us, that He embraces us. We are right when we say that God is our friend. But remember what it takes to get there. Think back to math classes – you’ve got to show your work before you jump to the end. And when we back up, and look at the work, we see the problem is that we, all like Isaiah, are unrighteous sinners, completely unworthy to be in God’s presence. We are people of unclean

lips, who come from a people of unclean lips. We do not start out as God's children, or His friends. We start out as His enemies, as unworthy in every way.

The last thing a sinner wants to do is gaze upon the face of God. More than the maître d' turning you away, it means death! To be ready, to be appropriate to the occasion, God has to deal with our unworthiness. As Isaiah makes His confession, that He is unworthy, a seraph flies to him with a live coal in his hand, taken with tongs off the altar. Yes, the altar, that place where sacrifices are made to God, where blood is offered to cover the guilt of God's people – a coal comes from where that sacrifice was burned and is touched to Isaiah's unclean lips. There's nothing magical about this coal – what's special is what God does, what He promises, through this coal. The seraph tells Isaiah, "See, this has touched your lips – your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Through the sacrifice, your guilt is removed!

You know that jacket at the nice restaurant? That ugly one with the crest nobody wants to wear? What does that jacket do for you? It makes you appropriate for the occasion. It grants you admission to a set apart place where you otherwise don't belong. It's what God's guilt-removal does for Isaiah and for us. True, we have not stood in God's throne room in the temple. In fact, our encounter with God has been even more personal.

For Isaiah, God was high and lifted up. He cleansed Isaiah's guilt with a touch to His lips. For us God does more. When Harper and Landon were baptized, the Holy Spirit made their bodies His temple – their hearts site of His throne room on earth. When we take communion we come into the presence of the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus. We get more than coal from the altar of a one-time sin sacrifice touching our lips – we get God Himself, the perfect, forever-lasting sacrifice, coming through our lips!

Now, with clean lips with sing with the angels around the throne. By ourselves, we're unworthy to sing it but Jesus' sacrifice that passes through our lips and makes us holy to stand in God's presence,

allows us to sing with them. We, His holy people are welcome in that throne room, no more out of place than the creatures singing His praise.

Always, keep that reverence, remembering what a privilege it is to get to come into God's presence in worship, in prayer, in thanksgiving, to call Him our Father – those things don't come to us automatically. But a special word to anyone here who doesn't need the reminder that being in God's presence is a privilege. If you've ever joked, only halfway joking that you thought the roof would cave in when you walked into this space, if you wonder if God can really forgive you or love you – Jesus' sacrifice is God's gift to you! God didn't cleanse us, remove our guilt, just so that we could spend our lives cowering before Him – He cleans us up to walk in dressed for the occasion knowing we're welcome. With Jesus you're never out of place with God. If you belong in the presence of the most exclusive company there is, how much more does that speak to your value in this world!

In the meantime, let's praise God like those angels It's the praise that we'll sing in God's presence, but we don't have to wait for the Second coming of Jesus. We get to sing it today, because of Jesus' sacrifice made for us. So, with angels, and archangels, and all the company of Heaven, we laud and magnify the holy name of our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, ever more praising Him and singing, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might! Heaven and earth are full of Your glory – Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" In Jesus' name, Amen.