

Holy Trinity B, 2009

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

Title: Seeing God

+INI+

How many of you would like to see God? Even just for a brief moment to see Him in all of His glory. If seeing is believing, then why not? Wouldn't that be great?

At times we all doubt whether or not God exists. When we see the evil in the world- every time you turn on the local news it seems like another young person on the south side has been shot. Or when you experience pain and suffering- as you lie in the hospital bed, staring at the ceiling in pain, or when you hold your loved one's hand as they slip away. When the job cuts are announced, and your name is on the list. When another Sunday comes and goes and fewer people are here, and fewer offerings are in the plate.

This is when the doubts come. And we start wondering...

If God exists, why doesn't He come and help us. Why doesn't He show Himself and prove that's He's real and that He cares about what's going on in this world? If I could only see God, then I would believe. If everyone saw God, everyone would believe, everyone would be saved, and things would be so much simpler.

Be careful what you ask for. Look what happened to Isaiah. Isaiah saw the Lord.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, the Lord was in the temple, just where you'd expect Him to be. The temple was the house of God, and this is where He chose to dwell with the people.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, it was the year that king Uzziah died. King Uzziah was not one of the more famous kings of Judah. You've probably never heard of him before. The Bible doesn't tell us much about Uzziah, other than the details surrounding his death.

King Uzziah died of leprosy. And the book of 2 Chronicles tells us why Uzziah got leprosy. Uzziah entered the Holy Place in the temple to burn incense. It was a place only priests were to go, and burning incense was something only priests were to do. It was a holy place and a holy task to be done only by holy people. Even though Uzziah was a king, it was not given to him to enter the temple and burn incense.

Only the priests were consecrated for this task. At their ordination the priests were covered with a bit of blood. Blood was smeared on the tips of their ears, on their thumbs, and on their big toes. Why? This cleansed the priests for the Lord's service. Their toes were cleansed, to walk on holy ground. Their thumbs were cleansed to handle the holy things. And their ears were cleansed, to hear God's holy voice.

It was safe for priests to enter the temple because they had been set aside for this at their ordination. They were holy, and so they could enter God's holy presence and do holy things. The blood cleansed them and made them holy.

It was not safe for the king, because he was not a priest, he had not been cleansed and consecrated. And so when King Uzziah enters the holy place and tries to do holy things, Uzziah contracts leprosy and dies.

And so, in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah finds himself in the temple. The veil between the seen and the unseen is pulled back, and Isaiah sees the unseen realities.

Isaiah sees the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, sitting on the throne, and His robe fills the temple. The Lord is flanked by six winged seraphim. The Hebrew seraph means "to burn," and so these are fiery angels of light. You will recognize their song- "Holy, Holy, Holy"- it was our opening hymn, and we'll sing it once more in a few moments. The song is so powerful that it shakes the very foundations of the temple, and the smoke from the altar of incense fills the temple.

It's hard to even imagine what this scene would have looked like, but Isaiah had every right to be scared. All of his senses are shaken- sight, smell, sound, touch and taste- all are overloaded. Isaiah knew that he was somewhere that he didn't belong. This was heaven on earth, but it was a scary place, filled with fire and smoke and loud noises. Isaiah realizes that it's all over for him. He's done. He's a dead man. He knows what happened to King Uzziah, and he expects the same fate.

Isaiah is unclean and his people are unclean, and there's no way that he can stand in the presence of a holy God and live. Like Uzziah, the result should be death. But the Lord does not reveal Himself to Isaiah to destroy him, but to purify him for His service. The Lord is going to use Isaiah to do some good, but those lips need to be cleansed first. And so an angel takes a live coal from the altar of incense and touches Isaiah's lips. The coal cleanses his lips and Isaiah is sent to preach.

Isaiah got to see God. And he wrote a description of what that was like. It was a frightening experience, and not something that Isaiah was certainly not anxious to repeat.

The Lord did not reveal Himself to Isaiah to satisfy Isaiah's curiosity. The Lord did not need to prove to Isaiah who He was or that He existed. When the Lord revealed Himself to Isaiah it was on His terms, not on Isaiah's terms. The Lord revealed Himself to Isaiah to atone for His sins and consecrate Him for service.

To see the Lord face to face is a terrifying thing. In all of our sinfulness and uncleanness, it's dangerous. No one can see God and live.

So by His grace, the Lord hides himself. He veils His presence for our own good so that we can see Him and hear Him and touch Him without being utterly destroyed. The Lord hides Himself in the physical, the things of earth.

The Lord hides Himself in our own flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ. The same Lord who sat on the throne and scared Isaiah to death, comes to earth as a tiny, helpless baby at Christmas.

One of the new Christmas hymns in our new hymnal has this verse:

Lo, within a stable lies  
He who built the starry skies  
He who throne in height sublime  
Sits amid the cherubim.

In Jesus, you could look at God and live. In Jesus you could hear the Lord speaking and not tremble in fear. God loved us so much that He hid himself in our flesh and He can interact with us. Jesus was someone you could talk to, someone you could share a meal with, someone you could go to the game with and have a good time. Jesus looked like an ordinary man. But when you looked at Jesus you saw God. Jesus says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

Nicodemus was trying to figure all this out. Jesus did things that only God could do. But Jesus didn't look like God. When Nicodemus pictured God, he pictured the God that Isaiah saw, high and lifted up, sitting on a throne, wearing a long, flowing robe, and surrounded by fiery angels. But if Nicodemus had seen this God, he would have been a dead man.

So God loves Nicodemus, and you too, so much that He hides Himself. He puts on flesh and blood. He doesn't look like a king, but a peasant. He doesn't wear a long, flowing robe, but simple cloak and tunic. He isn't surrounded by fiery angels, but by tax collectors and prostitutes.

What is most surprising is that God doesn't come to earth to be served, but to serve. Jesus tells Nicodemus that He comes to be lifted up like the snake in the wilderness, so that the world might have life.

God comes not to condemn, but to save.

If God had come as the God seen by Isaiah, the whole world would be condemned by His power and glory. People would have been filled with fear and trembling. If you were to see God in all of His power and His glory, you would die.

Instead, God dies. In Jesus, God dies for you. If you want to see God, look at the cross, and see God dying for you. God comes not to condemn the world, but to destroy it.

If you were to see God in all of His power and His glory, it would destroy you. When you want to see God, look to the cross. God comes to suffer with you and suffer for you. He hides Himself in flesh and blood to die for you and to put sin to death with all of its evil consequences.

The Lord continues to hide Himself. This morning, the Lord hides Himself in bread and wine. The same Lord whom Isaiah saw high and lifted up, the same Lord who spoke with Nicodemus and said that He would be lifted up, this same Lord makes this sanctuary His temple and this

altar His throne. He gives you His body and blood to cleanse you and purify you, as the coal that touched Isaiah's lips.

When the doubts come, amidst the pain and suffering of this world, and you long to see the Lord, don't look for Him in His power and might. If you were to see this God, it would be the end of you. Instead, look where God has chosen to hide Himself. Look to altar, pulpit and font, and see your God clothed in bread and wine, in word and water.