
Holy!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C

I am preaching about one word today. One word. It is a word that gets used often in everyday speech, but often as a kind of mild curse word. It's like the word, "Jesus" in that way. People use the word "Jesus" as an interjection, a kind of mild swear word, usually without considering what it means.

The word I preach about today is like that. It is a sacred word, but we rarely pause to consider what it really means, or could mean, to us. One might say, "we listen, but do not comprehend."

When we have hit our thumb with a hammer, we cry out, "Jesus!" And when something surprises us, we say, "Holy Moses!" or "Holy Mackerel" or Holy something.

Yes, I preach today about the word, "Holy," which we all say in a few minutes.

It is the word that Isaiah heard during a vision, a divine vision. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah said. In that year, the prophet and poet, Isaiah, came to life. Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and sitting on a throne, and his robe filled the temple. Isaiah began his public ministry. Isaiah grew up.

So awesome was the Lord's presence that the angels surrounding him—these seraphs—covered their faces and their feet. This image of angels being unable to cast their eyes upon God, even angels not gazing upon God—gives us a sense of how God exists so far beyond our comprehension. God is beyond comprehension.

But the angels were saying something. In fact, the angels were singing. They were singing a chorus that has existed forever, from before time and forever. It is a chorus that we try to sing, too, every week, in all sorts of languages: "Qados, Qados, Qados. " Hagios, Hagios, Hagios." "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus." "Holy, Holy, Holy." We chant it every week at this altar.

Every culture and tradition has a different name for it. "Holy, Holy, Holy." Many of us have various definitions for "holy," too, without realizing that we do. Does "holy" mean miraculously pure? Does it mean without sin? Does it mean saved? Does it mean off-limits?

Today, I propose a simple definition of the word, "holy." It is simple, but also mysterious: "Holy" is the experience of awe and intimacy at the same time. Which is to say: "Holy" is the experience of God and Self at the same time.

This past week, I wrote a letter to every member and friend of this parish, introducing our 2025 Stewardship Campaign. A stewardship campaign, by the way, is the way our parish church plans and pledges our financial support for God's work in the coming year. We make no excuses for needing money. Every organization needs money. For instance, you don't watch the Super Bowl without spending some money, say, for tickets, or a television, or a cable subscription, or a trip to New Orleans.

Anyway, the theme of this year's cathedral stewardship campaign is, "Building Holy Community." We are blessed to be a holy community in this parish; and I use the word, "holy," carefully. We are "community," for sure, sharing lives and laughter, tears and love. But, in particular, we are a "holy" community.

Which is to say, that when we gather in holiness, we experience awe and intimacy at the same time. We experience God and Self at the same time.

Yes, "holiness" means "the presence of God." To be holy is to practice the presence of God. To be holy is to make room for God. To be holy is to grow in God. Isaiah heard the angels singing "Holy, holy, holy."

Now, the presence of God has consequences. God is glory and light, yes. God is beauty and love, oh yes! But God is also truth. The presence of God is also truth.

The first truth that God's presence often delivers is the truth about us. When we are in the presence of God, we do not always learn something immediately about God. But we often learn something immediately about ourselves.

We learn, for instance, how small we are. We learn how limited we are. We realize, honestly, the things we have done. God's presence casts light into our lives. If God is light, yes, then that light will inevitably illuminate things. God's light will illuminate things we might wish were left alone in the dark.

In today's gospel, when the apostle Peter saw the amazing catch of fish that Jesus's instructions had produced, Peter immediately realized his own sinfulness! "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

So it was with Isaiah, when faced with God's great presence. When encountering holiness, the first thing Isaiah cries out is "Woe is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

What does it mean to be a person of unclean lips? What does it mean to live among a people of unclean lips? It means to be a person who speaks as if God is not present. To be unclean is to live, and speak, and act, as if God is not present. Unclean lips forget God. Unclean lips cast curses and speak violence. Unclean lips speak before God speaks; they speak instead of letting God speak.

Clean lips speak later. Clean lips wait for the touch of God.

So it was with Isaiah. "Woe is me," he cried out, realizing that he was a man of unclean lips. But then one of the angels took a live coal from the altar. (You can see it right over there, in the front stained glass window along the Peachtree Road wall!) One of the angels took a piece of divine light from the altar of light. One of the angels took this illumination, this coal of fire, and touched Isaiah's lips with it.

That angelic touch might not have felt very pleasant. Sometimes the touch of God is not soft and sweet, but hot and fiery. Yes, God is light! But God is also fire.

I love it when children come to the altar rail for communion. In fact, I love that time in our service, after we have all sung those magnificent words from Isaiah, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" when anyone comes to communion. I am not sure anyone has realized it yet, but children have a lot in common with adults. Some come to the altar rail eagerly and devoutly. But some children have to be coerced into coming. Some children come to communion with lovely smiles. But some adults –I mean children– come with scowls. Some come in joy; some in sorrow.

Some come confidently, knowing exactly what is going on. Some have no idea what communion means. I mean children and adults both. There is no difference before the altar of God.

Compared to the majesty and holiness of God, children and adults alike are small and limited. Neither children nor adults fully comprehend the glory of God. Seeing, we do not see. Hearing, we do not hear. But we approach the altar because, somehow, we want to grow in God. When we approach the altar, we are approaching Holy Community, Holy Communion.

Adults sometimes inform me that children should wait to receive communion, the bread and wine, until they have some sense, some comprehension, some ability to understand what is going on.

"Really?" I answer, "Until they can explain, or understand, what is going on? Tell me, Mr. or Mrs. Informed Adult, can you yourself adequately explain what is going on?"

"Holy, Holy, Holy." None of us completely comprehends Holy Communion. Just as none of us understands exactly what is going on when we are in the presence of God. But, somehow, whatever age we are, we experience "Holy Community." "Holy Communion" is "Holy Community."

Yes, we come forward so that something holy can touch our lips. The bread of heaven, the cup of salvation, touches our lips.

We learn, in this practice, to make room for God. We learn to practice the presence of God. Becoming holy

takes time. It takes practice. It means learning to wait for God to speak before we speak.

So it was with Isaiah. His lips were touched by the angel. Then God did speak. "Whom shall I send?" "And who will go for us?"

God does not touch us only for our own sakes. In our self-absorption, we think that's the reason. In our limited capacities, we think God touches us so that we might be cleansed, so that we might know God, so that we might be helped, so that we might be saved.

But the vision that God gave Isaiah was not meant for Isaiah alone. When the burning fire touched Isaiah's unclean lips, that cleansing was not meant for Isaiah alone. When Isaiah's guilt was removed from him, that was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of the story! It was the beginning of growth.

"Whom shall I send" the voice of the Lord thundered. "And who will go for us?"

"Holy, Holy, Holy" are not words that the people of God are meant to keep to ourselves. We are meant to grow up with them. The real evidence of holiness is how Isaiah answered. Isaiah leaps to answer, "Here I am! Send me! Put me in the game, coach!" "Send me in!" He grew up.

"Holy" is the experience of awe and intimacy at the same time. "Holy" is the experience of God and Self at the same time. "Do not be afraid," Jesus told Simon, "From now on you will be catching people." When we take our "Holy, Holy, Holy" out into the world, we will certainly be catching people.

Holy, Holy, Holy. Here I am, Here I am, Here I am. Send me.

AMEN.

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