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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, February 6, 2022

5 Epiphany, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 6:1-8](#)

[1 Corinthians 15:1-11](#)

[Luke 5:1-11](#)

[Psalm 138](#)

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“Holy, holy, holy.”

We sing those words at every Eucharist. They come from the vision of Isaiah we heard this morning, a vision of the heavenly worship around God’s throne. And every time we celebrate the Eucharist we join our voices with that never-ending worship, we join with the saints and angels.

It’s been said that holiness is the fundamental attribute of God. It’s almost redundant to say that “God is holy” because the word “holy” really describes just what God is. God is lots of things: God is good; God is beautiful; God is true; God is powerful; God is wise; and so on. But you don’t have to look necessarily to anything spiritual or religious to have a concept of knowledge or power or truth or beauty or even moral goodness. Those of us who believe in God believe God is the source of all those things, and anything beautiful or good in the world is a kind of reflection of God’s ultimate beauty and goodness. But holiness is a bit different

because it really has no meaning without reference to God. To describe what it means to be holy is to describe what God is like.

Now one traditional description of what it means for God to be holy is that God is totally separated from the slightest stain of sin or impurity. And that to come close to God means to prepare oneself by taking steps to become pure. Imagine a clean room in a hospital, or at NASA where a space telescope is being built: a room that's totally sealed from the outside and where air is filtered and anyone who comes in and goes out has to take strict precautions for protective equipment and sterilization. There are good reasons for those precautions. But as we've learned so heartbreakingly during the COVID pandemic, they make it hard to come close to one another. A God who's completely separate from us is easy to worship, but hard to have a loving and intimate relationship with.

Often our religious systems go on to designate which human beings are closer and farther away from God. All too often who's considered closer or farther away is based on things that don't have to do with real sin at all but are really about social constructions of acceptability or respectability. But there is such a thing as sin of course. It has to do not so much with things like whether or not you're an upstanding citizen or stay away from sex, drugs, and rock and roll, as with how your heart is toward God and your siblings among God's children. And none of us is free of it. So if what it means for God to be holy is that God is the sole inhabitant of a cosmic clean room, then none of us is ever going to meet God.

The good news is the scriptures we hear proclaimed tonight show us a God with a completely different idea of what holiness is all about. This God doesn't stay apart in a safe, sterilized heaven waiting for us to make ourselves good enough to knock

on the door. This holy God comes to humans, comes to US, unfazed by our worthiness or unworthiness. This God is in the business not of protecting God's own holiness but of sharing it with us; not of waiting until we make ourselves good enough but of *making* us good enough; and then most of all, of commissioning us to join in the mission of spreading that holiness.

Look at Isaiah. In the presence of God's holiness, he's terrified by his sinfulness. "I'm a man of unclean lips and I come from a people of unclean lips." But God doesn't seem to see it as a problem. God sends angel to purify his lips and immediately commissions him to go and preach to the people of Israel.

Look at Peter. In the presence of God's holiness, which he experiences in the person of Jesus, he's terrified by his sinfulness. "Go away from me, Lord, for I'm a sinful man!" Jesus doesn't go through any ritual of purification, not even a burning coal. He just tells Peter not to be afraid—and in the next breath commissions him to fish for people.

Look at Paul as he looks back on his former life persecuting Christians. At the time he hardly thought he was doing anything to be ashamed of. He was acting out of a commitment to God's holiness, trying to stamp out a movement he saw as blasphemous. But then he met the living Jesus. And he was horrified at what he'd been doing. "I'm unfit to be called an apostle," Paul writes. But the same God of Isaiah and Peter makes Paul holy and commissions him to proclaim the message of salvation outside the people of Israel, to the Gentiles. So Paul can say it's "by the grace of God" that he is what he is.

Unlike what we continually expect, the God of the scriptures seems to be almost scandalously un-preoccupied with our unworthiness. God is preoccupied less with condemning sin than with responding to it. As one Episcopal priest I know says, in the light of God's forgiveness, "Your sin is no longer the most interesting thing about you. Sin is a problem God has solved."¹ What God wants to do is put us back into right relationship so God can work in us and through us to bless the world.

That means holiness might not mean exactly what we might think it means. Yes, God is holy, infinitely holy. But holy not by standing apart from everything that's broken or painful or just messed up. God's holiness is found in showing up right in those places. What was the holiest place in Jerusalem on a Friday in the year 30 AD? In one sense, it was the Holy of Holies on the Temple Mount, the acknowledged place of God's presence, a place of beauty and mystery, a place set apart. But for those of us who follow Jesus, we believe the very holiest place of all was outside the city walls on a small hill where God had come to be beaten and executed by the most powerful and respectable leaders of the day.

What is the holiest place in Santa Rosa today, I wonder? Is it this altar where Christ comes to us each week, or the tabernacle where we lovingly keep the reserved sacrament of his body and blood? In one sense yes, because the sacrament is the presence of Jesus and nothing can be holier. But this is the same Jesus who doesn't stay put in places of beauty, places set apart. So maybe today the holiest place in town is where Jesus is showing up in an intensive care unit in Memorial Hospital, or a cell in the county detention center. Jesus is showing up right now in a home where someone is struggling with addiction and in a car where someone is

¹ Gray Temple, *The Molten Soul: Dangers and Opportunities in Religious Conversion* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), 158.

driving away from an abusive relationship. Jesus is showing up with someone getting up at 3:30 to go to work and with a teenager hurting from something just posted on Instagram. We can come to this place seeking holiness, and we'll find it here—but if we truly find it here it will catapult us out to follow Jesus in all the places he's moving across the world he came to love and save.

So come to this table with the song of the angels on your lips, and then go out bearing God's holiness to seek and find God's holiness in everyone you meet and are called to serve. Holy! Holy! Holy!