

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

In the year that King Uzziah died, the Lord was not yet done with his people. Nor will he ever be.

In the long sequence of Judah's kings, Uzziah had been a fairly good king. Plenty of them were bad kings and impious people, and the Bible's final comment on them followed the dreary pattern of judgment made on King Solomon two centuries earlier:

And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. (1 Kings 11:6, KJV)

But Uzziah had been faithful enough that Israel's chronicle of his life ends in a mild way, without the usual judgment against the reign of the man:

So Uzziah slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the field of the burial which belonged to the kings; (2 Chron. 26:23, KJV)

Besides this — besides his fair faithfulness — King Uzziah also reigned for a long time: for more than fifty years. He ruled for half a century, and a prosperous century it was for Judah. There must have been complaints about the King — always there are — and yet, by and large, it is reasonable to think that so long as Uzziah was in charge, all was well.

And so, there must have been a void and a loneliness when Uzziah died. Perhaps it was akin to the loneliness you might be feeling if you have lost your beloved or that one who helped make the world seem safe for you. Perhaps it was akin to the loneliness I am feeling now that I hear that my dear old pastor, Rev. Raymond Shaheen, has died. And yet, in the year that King Uzziah died, the Lord was not yet done with his people. It was as if He who had carried them heretofore, meant to carry them henceforth, with even more earnestness.

And so, in the year in which Uzziah died, one of Judah's young ones, Isaiah, was permitted to see the Lord Almighty, "sitting on a throne, high and lofty."

For this morning's Reformation choral liturgy, Music Director Scott Warren has chosen a version of the *Sanctus* that goes back to the times of the Reformers. We have sung this version of the *Sanctus* before here at Immanuel, and we seem to love it. Evelyn Junge knows it by heart, I do believe. It is a text and tune by Martin Luther and it expresses well something of the majesty of that scene that Isaiah was permitted to see. Let me read now the words we will later sing:

Isaiah, Mighty Seer, in Days of Old

Isaiah, mighty seer, in days of old
the Lord of all in spirit did behold
high on a lofty throne, in splendor bright,
with flowing train that filled the temple quite.
Above the throne were stately seraphim;
six wings had they, these messengers of him.
With twain they veiled their faces, as was
meet,
with twain in rev'rent awe they hid their feet,
and with the other twain aloft they soared,
one to the other called and praised the
Lord:
"Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
Behold, his glory filleth all the earth!"
The beams and lintels trembled at the cry,
and clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne
on high.

Text: Martin Luther, 1483-1546;
tr. composite

Seraphim, and angels in general, are the kind of creatures who seem to burn with love. When they sing, they do not sing of strength nor ability to conquer, but they sing of love. When the Christmas angels sing, for example, they do not sing of trembling pillars in the heavenly temple, but of peace, good will on earth. They sing not of oak trees that writhe at the sound of the Lord's voice, but of the good news that unto us has been born a

Saviour. They are stirred when they perceive a mighty work of love.

So it is with these seraphim in Isaiah's vision. There is power and majesty all around them, with the hem of the Lord's robe filling the temple, and with the lintels and beams trembling at the Lord's voice. But that of which the seraphim sing is not of God's strength, but of his holiness. And well they should, for strength without purity is terrifying (Matthew Henry). The intellect of the angels far outpaces ours, yet these high angels are so transfixed by God that they can sing of nothing higher than his holiness, and so they simply repeat the same praise three times, because that's the best they can do: holy, holy, holy!

Some sights take the breath away and humble us. The sight of the Lord God enthroned on high forced a confession from Isaiah:

And I said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5)

Likewise, in this morning's Gospel Lesson, St. Peter is driven to confession:

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. (Luke 5:8)

Simon is awe-struck by Jesus, and well he should be, for he knows himself to be in the presence of the Holy One of Israel.

Some sights stir the soul, I say, and that is my main topic this morning. We human beings are the sort of creatures who can be moved by the sight of holiness. And about this human capacity to be stirred, I want to offer three observations:

- 1) It is right and fitting that the sight of holiness should turn us away from sin, so that we confess, lament, wail the wrongs we have done, and resolve to do better.
- 2) Nonetheless, in spite of the sin of which we might be conscious, the Lord can still use us for his holy purposes.
- 3) We ourselves should strive to be a reflection of that divine holiness of life that so stirred Isaiah and St. Peter long ago. This will be my chief theme, but let me turn to the other two, at least briefly.

First, when we consider the holiness of our God, it is right that we should be troubled by a kind of holy consternation. Perhaps I will return to this

idea on Palm Sunday or Good Friday. Grief at our sins, when we contemplate the passion of Christ, is right to be had, for our sins were, each one, failures of love for this world, but in looking upon Him, we look upon one who never failed love, not once, nor even at the cost of his life. When we consider him who bore such suffering, yet never abandoned the path of love, we should be led to join the lament of St. Peter:

Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

Yet depart from us is something God will not do. And so Peter might measure himself against Jesus and be led to cry out, "Depart from me," yet Jesus answers, always,

And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. (Luke 5:10)

This is my second point. In spite of the sin of which we might be conscious, the Lord can still use us for his holy purposes. Jesus is well able to take a sinner and turn him, turn her into a saint. There are adventures upon adventures awaiting the one who leaves the fishing nets and follows Jesus – and every one of them good and true. Holy consternation can and should be followed by confession, absolution, and discipleship in the steps of our blessed Lord Jesus.

And this leads me to my final point: When we walk in the path of discipleship, following on behind Jesus in our daily life, we ourselves become a sight for sore eyes. Indeed, we become a kind of vision of holiness for our neighbors – the only sermon they might ever hear. Through the beauty of holiness that can adorn the life of the Christian, other people in this town can be drawn to Jesus and to his Church. The sight Isaiah saw in olden days took his breath away and invited him to serve the Lord henceforth. Likewise, the sight of you could well be the very blessing that brings others to the Saviour.

This past week, I was pleased to hear a lecture by The Reverend Samuel T. Lloyd III, Dean of the Washington National Cathedral. He was the banquet speaker for the annual stewardship dinner at nearby St. James Episcopal Church.

In the course of his very fine and uplifting address, Dean Lloyd offered an idea I have long believed. His way of putting it was that the Church is a "movement," not a "club." In its hearts of hearts, the Church is not a genial gathering of like-minded folk who like to regularly get together. No, the Church is something much more awesome than that: It is a holy movement afoot on this earth.

And so, from the very beginning, the Church has grown by way of drawing others into this holy movement. How did the Twelve conquer the world? How did the apostles, maybe twenty in number, draw the multitudes to Christ? Answer: 'twas the beauty of holiness that fetched the world. It was the moral excellence of the lives of ordinary Christians that stirred the soul of the pagans and made them want to come to Christ.

The pagans looked on at the Christians, as they always do, and admired the fact that the Christians were compassionate. They cared for the poor, for the widows and widowers, for the fallen. They opposed slavery, they opposed infanticide, they opposed the blood lust of the Roman arenas. They maintained hope in dire circumstances, even in times of persecution. It was evident about them that they counted themselves disciples of someone called Jesus, and being his disciples, they were better people. The world wanted to join them. The world wanted to be part of this movement.

Always that will be the best path for evangelism. Newspaper ads are nice, but nowhere compared to the beauty of your lives out there in the world.

By this time next Sunday, many of our congregational leaders will have gathered for a retreat. Say a prayer for us, for we are striving for good things. Each of our leaders brings hopes and dreams and creativity to the retreat. Let me mention my hopes and dreams. I bet they are similar to that of others leaders and to yours too: I am hoping that this retreat will help us burst ahead in souls and in Sunday School. For a generation, we've been a hundred people in these pews on a Sunday morning, but we have space for two hundred, now don't we? And we've been maybe fifteen children in Sunday School, yet we have room for more, and we should have more, for our children swim in different currents from us and their spiritual path might well be even harder than ours was.

So, I am hoping that this retreat will result in some ideas and plans to help our congregation burst ahead in worship attendance and Sunday School. What our leaders can do, they will do.

But be encouraged to know that there is something each of us can do, whether or not we are congregational leaders, whether or not we attend a retreat. And that is that we can recommit ourselves to life in Christ. In work and in play, in season and out, with friends and with strangers, we can be the occasion for a quiet *Sanctus* for them. We can permit others to notice the manner of our Christian life and in noticing be stirred by the beauty of holiness. That is, we can seriously try to be what Jesus says we are: the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the apostle speaks of God's throne – that throne that so moved and humbled Isaiah long ago. It is an awesome throne, no doubt about it, yet the apostle commends it to you and me under another designation. He no longer speaks of it as God's throne "high and lofty," but rather as the "throne of grace," and he encourages us to have confidence in approaching that throne:

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.(Hebrews 4:16, KJV)

Coming to the throne of grace means coming to Jesus, the very Man of Grace, the very Helper of those in time of need. Let us, then, continually come to Him, and in the coming, we will help not only ourselves, but also a weary world looking on at us. Indeed, by renewing our Christian life, we bring glory to the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.