

Luke 5:1-11 & Isaiah 6:1-8 Fear Not! You are Forgiven!

We are studying the Book of Jonah in Thursday morning Bible class. Among other things, we have been comparing and contrasting the events in the life of Jonah with the life of Jesus. This week much of our attention was focused on the prayers of the sailors to their false gods and Jonah's refusal to pray to the one true God. We also talked about the reason the sailors threw their cargo overboard. It may surprise to learn that it wasn't primarily to lighten the load of the boat. Being polytheists, these men were hoping to save themselves from the wrath of the sea god by offering their cargo as a sacrifice so that he would lighten the load of the storm. As we studied the first chapter of Jonah we learned that each man was praying to his own god, while Jonah was sleeping in the deepest part of the boat trying to hide from God.

Most of you are familiar with the story of Jonah, so I won't retell the whole story. For now, all you need to know is that Jonah tells the men that he is a Hebrew and he worships "the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land" (Jonah 1:9). Then he tells them to throw him into the sea and the storm will end. And just he said, the storm immediately abated once Jonah had been cast into the depths of the sea.

What happened before and after the storm subsides is where we find the connection with today's readings from Luke and Isaiah. Before the men threw Jonah into the sea they prayed to Jonah's God, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. They prayed that He would not hold the innocent blood of Jonah against them. In other words, they prayed that God would forgive them. Immediately after the storm subsides, they recognize the awesome power of God and offer Him sacrifices and, as Jonah puts it, "they worshipped Him exceedingly." Having seen the awesome power of God they, like Peter and Isaiah, recognize they are in the presence of Almighty God and cower in fear and awe. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" Peter declares (Lk 5:8). "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Isaiah declares (Is 6:5).

In light of recent events legalizing the murder of babies, even moments before being born, and the ever increasing promotion of self as the ultimate and final authority of right and wrong, one wonders if we have lost the understanding of Isaiah, Peter, and those sailors concerning who we really are and what our status truly is before the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land and everything that has been made.

One wonders if anyone actually means or pays attention to what is said in corporate confession. Or is it just a bunch of words we speak as part of our weekly ritual? "I a poor miserable sinner confess unto You all my sins and iniquities... yadda yadda yadda. Ho-hum. Can we sit down now? The pastor's going to tell me it's all good anyway."

Many times our attitude toward God is more like that of an unbeliever, than that of one who truly knows, and is known by, the Lord of heaven and earth. Perhaps that is why there isn't much urgency to be on time for church for some people. Perhaps that is why we hear people complain that they don't get anything out of church.

But the problem isn't with the church or even the worship service. The problem is with our haughty, sinful, attitude toward God and the gifts He freely offers when we are gathered in His presence. Since God hasn't appeared before us in a pillar of fire or a cloud of smoke for quite some time, nor has He rattled the rafters with His thunderous voice, we just don't grasp the fact that we are actually sinners in the presence of the Most High Holy God. Nor do we believe that we truly do deserve His punishment, both now and eternally.

If we would wrap our hearts and our minds around those truths, then I suspect there would be more reverence in our worship and more churches would have kneelers and they would be used every time God's people prayed, confessed their sins, and received the Lord's Supper. Like Peter, we would be too terrified to stand before the Lord.

The truth of our condition before God almighty is clearly spoken by both Isaiah and Peter. "Woe is me! For I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips..." "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" And so are we all. Like Isaiah, we, are people with unclean lips, who should tremble in the presence of almighty God. We should cower in fear and hang our heads in shame as we fall on our faces before Him, as Peter did. For God is holy, and we are not.

But instead, stiff-necked people that we are, with knees that will not bend, not recognizing that Almighty God is truly present among us, our minds wander even as He speaks His word of Absolution to us. In our self-righteous arrogance, we may even refuse to participate in worshipping Him, or sing the songs that give glory and honor to Almighty God. Instead, we stand or sit stoically waiting for it to be over.

I urge you to consider the scene described by Isaiah in today's Old Testament lesson. When he saw God in all His splendor and majesty and glory, he wasn't waving his hands over his head singing praise songs and reveling in the emotional experience of his close encounter with almighty God. His reaction was one of fear, humility, and reverence. Isaiah was afraid because he knew what he truly was -- a sinner in the presence of the most holy God. And nothing unholly can remain or live in His presence unless God graciously permits it.

Isaiah, who was a mighty prophet of God, who spoke with the authority of God among His people, was humble, reverent, and full of fear and awe before God. He saw God in all His awe-inspiring, over-whelming glory, and he trembled.

Isaiah found himself in the presence of the great "I Am," the Creator of all that is seen and unseen. He saw his true condition before God Almighty – a sinful man of unclean lips, a man who was doomed. He saw himself for what he truly was – a poor miserable sinner, who had sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what he had done, and by what he had left undone. He knew without a doubt that he had not loved the Lord with his whole heart, and had he loved his neighbor as himself.

Isaiah saw, and understood what we also confess; that he was a sinner deserving God's wrath and eternal punishment. He realized that he was by nature dead in his trespasses and sins with nothing to merit God's grace and favor. Isaiah's conscience convicted him of his sin. He had no righteousness to offer that would appease God's wrath or earn His forgiveness. He stood exposed before God almighty in his sin and shame.

Peter, in like manner, falls to his knees in the boat, at the feet of Jesus, convicted by his sin, praying in fear that the Holy One of God would depart, knowing that he was unworthy to be in His presence. Peter's response is similar to that of Isaiah as he, too, finds himself in the presence of the most high holy God. What Peter saw and experienced was but a mere glimpse of what Isaiah had seen and heard. Peter saw the awesome deeds of God in His state of humiliation. Yet, even this minor display of God's power and might, demonstrated in the great catch of fish, was enough to bring Peter to his knees with fear and trembling, begging the Lord to depart from him.

Isaiah and Peter are completely undone. They feel the uncleanness of their sin with singular clarity. Isaiah is literally brought to silence as though dead. Under the weight of his sins Peter pleads for God's mercy. Such is the reaction of those who receive even a small glimpse of the divine and holy nature of God. They are crushed by the reality of their sin. Any façade of self-righteousness is stripped away as the light of God's glory reveals the darkness of their souls. All pride is removed, and despair comes crashing down. It is a fearful thing to be delivered into the hands of almighty God.

So, what about you? What is your understanding of your condition before God, this day, as you stand in His presence?

Whether you realize it, or not, you are in the presence of almighty God. Like Moses, who out of reverence for God removed his shoes on the mountain, you, too, stand on holy ground in the presence of Almighty God, the same God before whom Isaiah trembled and Peter shrank in fear.

You, too, are men and women and children of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips. You, too, are unworthy to stand in the presence of God. And unlike the angels Isaiah saw, you have no wings to hide your shame. Instead, you stand exposed in your sin before the holy God of heaven and earth. Yes, it is true. Woe is me! And woe is you. Woe unto us all, for we are unclean and lost in our sin.

With their confession of complete and utter sinfulness and unworthiness to be in the presence of God, Isaiah and Peter confess what we must also confess... "But I am heartily sorry for them, and sincerely repent of them. And I pray You of Your boundless mercy, and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter suffering and death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being."

Then as now, God is gracious and merciful to those who repent and turn to Him in faith. Then as now, He bestows His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through means.

To Isaiah, God sent an angel, a seraph from His army, to bestow His grace and mercy and forgiveness. The angel flew to the altar of the Lord, the place of sacrifice, and took from it a burning coal, a remnant from the burnt offering for sin, and placed it, still burning, on Isaiah's lips. And in so doing Isaiah is purified of his sin. His sins are forgiven. "Behold your guilt is taken away, ... and your sin atoned for" (Is 6:7).

Not by any merit or worthiness on his part, but rather by the merits of the Lamb who had been sacrificed for sin, the guilt of Isaiah's sin is removed, atoned for, and he is made holy as he partakes of the flesh that had been sacrificed for his sin.

And the Good News is that the guilt of your sin has also been taken away ... your sins atoned for by the flesh and blood of Lamb who sacrificed Himself in payment for your sins. Out of His great love for you Jesus took on our human flesh in order to give Himself as the fully atoning sacrifice for your sins. Jesus, who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, has removed the uncleanness of your sin and bestowed upon you God's grace and mercy and forgiveness for your sins.

As the angel was sent by God to Isaiah to comfort him with God's peace and assure him that his sins were fully atoned for, so He sends forth the Holy Spirit who bestows upon you the power to believe that Christ Jesus was sacrificed on the altar of the cross for your sins. He covers you in the pure and spotless robe of Christ's righteousness so that you need no fig leaves, animal skins, or wings to cover the shame of your sin. And He opens your heart and mind to see and believe that you are indeed a poor miserable sinner deserving nothing but God's present and eternal punishment, yet a sinner who has been forgiven, not by your own merits or worthiness, but by the merits and worthiness of Jesus Christ.

This Jesus, who is God in the flesh, has not revealed Himself to you in His power and might, but, rather, in the humiliation and shame of His crucifixion and His glorious resurrection from the dead. He is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and His cross is both His sacrificial altar and His royal throne, and it is the glory of His Church. For it is through the cross that Christ fills the earth with His glory. It is through the cross that the kingdom of heaven is opened to all believers.

Those who see the glory of Jesus on the cross, see what Isaiah was privileged to see – the glory of almighty God and His gracious, loving, mercy for poor miserable sinners like you and me. Like Isaiah and Peter, as we come before God in worship, we come before Him humbly confessing our sins, our utter depravity, and our total unworthiness to be in His presence. And He bids us to put away our fear and hear His comforting word of absolution. "Do not be afraid. For the sake of My Son, I forgive you all your sins."

God's wrath and punishment for your sin has been satisfied by the blood of Lamb who was slain for you salvation. Therefore, you need not fear God's anger. And just as Isaiah was made pure by partaking of the burning ember that came from the Lord's altar, so in the Lord's Supper when the flesh and blood of the perfect, holy, Sacrifice for sin is placed on your lips, you are purged of your sin, and made holy and righteous before God.

Therefore, as you depart from God's holy the altar this day, do so with joy and the comforting words of the angel singing in your ears, "Behold, this has touched your lips... your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for Jesus' sake, God's condemnation for your sin has been lifted, the fear of God's punishment is gone, and you now stand with the angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven, joyfully singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!"

Amen