

'HOLY, HOLY, HOLY'

Isaiah 6:1-8; Rev. 4:6-11

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This is sacred space, a place where we expect to encounter God. But if we accept Isaiah's vision, only a very small part of God actually fits into the space. Picture this space filled up with just the hem of God's robe. Step outside and see this enormous throne that dwarfs our sacred space, a throne on which God sits surrounded by angels. And these angels have six wings, two covering their eyes because the glory of God is too bright for even angels to take in. That's a vision!

"Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!" So opens the hymn which takes its cue from this vision and the reading from Revelation. These verses and this hymn uproot us from the garden where Jesus walks with me and you, and thrust us into a vast universe commanding awe and humility.

Much of our spiritual journey is spent with the friend we have in Jesus, but for Isaiah and for John, it begins with this overpowering vision. Isaiah is lost in a sense of his own inadequacy and amazed that he should be seeing such a sight. To a lesser degree, I imagine that we feel a little like this when God calls us into leadership. For Isaiah it was a call to prophetic ministry. For us today it is a call to service on the session.

On such occasions, it is good to be reminded of the God who calls. For the hymn and the scripture, the majesty of God occupies center stage, but it is not the whole story. While the "whole earth is full of God's glory," Isaiah is brought up to the task by the assurance of forgiveness, and the "blotting out of sin." Isaiah's cleansing enables him to respond with, "Here am I, send me!"

The hymn speaks of God the Almighty who is also merciful. And despite the terrifying might of God, the scene in both Isaiah and Revelation erupts with praise. Praise instead of fear because mercy is integral to the very nature of God.

We see this mercy in the beauty of creation, in the majesty of mountains and the vastness of the oceans; though humbling, these wonders also inspire us. We experience it in the way the earth sustains us: in the soil with nutrients to produce healthy food and the rains to water the crops. We take it in with the very air we breathe, without which we cannot live.

We witness God's mercy extended to us in the work of redemption and reconciliation where God sends prophets like Isaiah to call us back to the way of health and wholeness, and where God enters our life in Jesus Christ demonstrating the extent of love that both forgives and calls us to a new of life

We see God's mercy in the work of the Spirit who distributes gifts to each of us for the common good, who teaches truth, and who sustains the church for its witness to the world.

We know God's mercy in this "blessed Trinity" which preserves the mystery and awe of God while modeling for us community and right relationship. The doctrine of the trinity reminds us that God is one in purpose and yet diverse in the expression of that purpose. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer carry this balance of mercy and might which we experience in the works of creation, in Christ who walks beside us, and in the spirit at work within us.

The power and mercy of God together enable us to respond as Isaiah with "Here am I, send me." The power tells us that here is work worth doing and the mercy reminds us that we are not in it alone. When we fall, and we will, God lifts us up.

Whether you are answering the call to leadership in the church or the call to some other service, begin with this sense that God is able to make great things happen and the assurance that God's mercy will sustain you through the inevitable mistakes.

The hymn tells us that God is "perfect in power, in love and purity." These qualities are also important in exercising leadership in the church. Remember as you take office today that you are given authority. Most of the decisions made are not made by popular vote. You are being invested with responsibility for leading this congregation. It is a holy undertaking, seasoned with prayer and trusting in God's mercy. It is power informed by love. This is what moves God, and ought to be what moves us.

Now the word purity comes with a lot of baggage. I'm not sure what Reginald Heber meant by it back in the early 19th century, but I suspect he was mostly concerned about integrity. Purity binds power and love together. Purity is the action that follows when power and love are working together. The actions have integrity. Purity says that we believe we are doing the right thing for the common good.

Hear the words now before we sing them:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee
Who wert and art and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! thought the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinfulness Thy glory may not see,
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy name, in earth and sky and sea;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Amen.