

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)

Hebrew is different than English in that English has special forms of words to state an adjective's positive ("mad"), comparative ("madder"), or superlative state ("maddest"). Even if a child says "gooder" or "goodest," we know by the form what it means. Hebrew employs different ways to communicate the comparative and superlative degrees. One way to communicate "more" is to repeat the adjective, as "deep deep" translated "deep, very deep" (Ecclesiastes 7:24). If you go all out (and Isaiah 6 is an "all out" chapter), you repeat something three times to intensify the idea. The Seraphs shout back and forth to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Their "triple holy" communicates that the God they serve and worship is beyond description. They could keep shouting "holy" and never adequately describe God as infinitely beyond our human understanding of holiness.

The Old Testament shows gradations of holiness. As people penetrate the temple, the very center is the "holy of holies," another way for Hebrew to express the "holiest" place. Priests are holy as well as angels, times, sacrificial offerings, buildings, foods, and ultimately the entire people of Israel (Leviticus 20:26).

When we ask the meaning of "holy," we run into a unique problem. Every other theological word in the Bible had a secular, earthly beginning. Then it was applied metaphorically to spiritual matters and often captured completely by the religious vocabulary. Yet, even when such a word melts completely into the religious vocabulary, scholars can point to how the word began in normal conversation and conclude something of how it applies to God. Not the word "holy." It has no previous earthly associations. Thus in one more dimension Yahweh's holiness is incomparable.

We're left with another way to determine what holy means. We can walk into the temple with Isaiah and experience it. Isaiah's prophetic ministry has begun before chapter 6; thus, his ministry takes an infinite step upward in seriousness. He has a vision. Consider this vision as God happening to him. Everything in Isaiah 6 communicates that God is in control. Neither Isaiah as he takes part in this event nor we who study it can somehow grasp it in order to learn everything about it and then proceed casually on with life. Isaiah 6 is something that happens; God happens to Isaiah.

Isaiah has been here before, yet now the place erupts with God's presence. It's as though Isaiah sees into the inner shrine and there Yahweh-God sits on the covenant box, the place called the "mercy seat." It becomes a throne and Yahweh is high, almost to the ceiling. The statues of the winged creatures that flank the central shrine start flying and they burn with God's presence. This is God happening to Isaiah.

Here in the temple what is visually strange communicates to Isaiah that Yahweh is qualitatively and quantitatively different from humans. This God who is beyond adequate comparison or description, who is outside conventional categories and who exceeds all religious traditions, infuses all creation with his significance/glory. And he's beyond creation too.

This event leads to God's short dialogue with Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" God doesn't take the trouble of encountering us in worship so we can have a dandy religious thrill. God's holiness sends us to those who need us, who need our hands and voices, our money and time. Today God sends us beyond the church with Jesus' holy new and Jesus' holy compassion.

PREACHING POINT

Near the beginning of the sermon ask, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" and teach the congregation on your cue to respond, "Here am I; send me." Repeat it until the congregation learns the cue and their response. When you are ending your sermon with God's call to service, make your gesture and say, "Today God asks, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' " After the congregation's response, speak the question louder and wait for a fuller response. Then offer prayer..