

ISAIAH 6:1–8. (EHV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each one had six wings. With two they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet. With two they flew. One called to another and said,

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies!
The whole earth is full of his glory!

The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of the one who called, and the temple was filled with smoke. Then I said, “I am doomed! I am ruined, because I am a man with unclean lips, and I dwell among a people with unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, carrying a glowing coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with the coal and said, “Look, this has touched your lips, so your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.” Then I heard the Lord’s voice, saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am. Send me!”

What does it mean to be holy?

In the year that King Uzziah died, about 2,764 years ago, Isaiah saw the Lord. Well, he didn’t really get a good look, not a face-to-face look. The Lord was seated on a throne, high and exalted. So Isaiah could only see him from below; he really had to crane his neck. He was like a little boy standing on the sidewalk across the road from the Sears Tower in Chicago and trying his best to see the very top and to imagine what it really looks like up there.

What he *could* see face-to-face, on Earth level, was the train of the Lord’s robe. Those of you children who maybe don’t know what the train of a robe is, think of a wedding, when the bride walks down the aisle. Oftentimes her dress is so long and beautiful that there is a bunch of extra material trailing behind her as she walks. That extra material is called the train of her dress. When she stops at the altar, the Maid of Honor has to adjust her train for her to make sure it looks nice as she’s standing there. Then the Maid of Honor has to adjust it again when the bride turns around at the end of the service to return down the aisle, to make sure the bride doesn’t step on or trip over the beautiful train of that dress.

Some kings have large and ornate robes like that, too. And Isaiah saw the Lord with such a robe. Only the train of the Lord’s robe didn’t take up a few feet of space like the train of a wedding dress. The train of the Lord’s robe filled the entire temple.

This gives us just a glimpse into how great and high and exalted the Lord is and what Isaiah saw of him. Let’s imagine that you have a membership at a gym, and you’re given a locker as part of your membership. As you’re changing at your locker, you notice that the locker next to you is open and you can’t help but notice that there are a huge pair of shoes in there. You take a closer look and you notice that inside the shoe, where the heel would go, is printed the size number 20. Even if you never saw the guy who was using that locker, what would you know about him? You would know for a fact that he wasn’t your height. You would know that he was much, much taller than you. Seven feet tall? Eight feet tall? Goliath-size, perhaps?

So if just the train of the Lord's robe filled the temple, how huge is the Lord? How great a king is he? You might remember learning in grade school math that the formula for the area of a rectangle is length times width, and that if the rectangle is three-dimensional, the formula for the volume of that rectangular space is length times width times height. The Bible tells us that Solomon's temple, which was still around in Isaiah's day, was about ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high. So the volume that the train of the Lord's robe was taking up was ninety times thirty times forty-five. That's 121,500 cubic feet of space! My goodness, that is one large robe-train! And if it filled the temple, it could conceivably have been larger! So if that's just the train of the Lord's robe, then how big and great is the One wearing it?

And Isaiah saw some awesome-looking attendants waiting upon the Lord too: "Above him stood the seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying." This is the only time in the Bible we're told about seraphs or seraphim. They are not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill angels. The word *seraph* in Hebrew is related to the word for *burning*, so these were likely angels with a fiery appearance, or flashing like lightning.

And they were calling to one another: "'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies; the fullness of all the earth is his glory.' The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of the one who called, and the temple was filled with smoke." The seraphs describe the One sitting on the throne as holy, but they call it out three times.

Now people who consider themselves experts in the Bible love to get into debates about why the seraphs call the Lord holy three times. But really, it's part of a larger debate about the doctrine of the Trinity. Many church history experts like to talk about the Christian Church *developing* the doctrine of the Trinity, which of course implies that the Bible doesn't actually teach it. And there are various arguments for that. One of them is that the words *triune* and *Trinity* never appear in the Bible. Another is that even our definition for the Trinity—three persons in one God—is never found in the Bible in those exact words. And another is that even though the New Testament does mention Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, the Old Testament does not, at least not explicitly.

A number of years ago I discovered that the German word for *almonds*, *Mandeln*, is also used for *tonsils*. And one of the words for *tonsillitis* in German used to be *Mandelbräune*, which literally means *almond browning*. Can you take a guess why the Germans call tonsils "almonds" and why they used to call tonsillitis "almond browning"? If you do a Google image search for tonsils, you will see that tonsils are in fact almond-shaped and my guess is that, if they get infected, they turn some shade of brown. We come up with words to describe reality.

In the same way, the early Christians came up with the words *triune*, which simply means *three-one*, and *Trinity*, which means *three-oneness*, to describe the reality that the Bible names three different persons in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but only names one God and repeatedly affirms that he is only one essence or being. So just the fact that *triune* and *Trinity* don't appear in the Bible doesn't mean that the Church *developed* the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is true that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are never once mentioned together as such in the Old Testament. God did not reveal himself as definitely to his Old Testament people as he has to his New Testament people. But to say that God did not reveal himself as triune in the Old

Testament is not true. After all, the seraphs call out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies.” They say holy three times, but they only identify one LORD.

Some have said they repeated it three times to indicate that God is perfectly holy. But why does three represent perfection? Did we come up with that idea? No, three represents perfection because the most holy Being is three persons.

Some have said they repeated it three times to solemnly assure the audience that God is in fact holy. But after what he saw, do you think Isaiah needed any assurance that God was holy? And not only that, but the seraphs did not intend their song for Isaiah. We’re told they were calling “to one another.” For sure the seraphs did not need any assurance that God was holy. It’s not like they had to keep repeating it to convince themselves.

No, with our New Testament knowledge, we know exactly what the seraphs meant by their words: God the Father is holy, God the Son is holy, and God the Spirit is holy. And just the sound of the voices of these attendants of God, just the message of God’s holiness, and the message that he is in charge of armies, which means that he commands all the angels and really, that everything he created in all the universe is under his command—just that message by itself caused the foundations of the thresholds of the temple to shake.

Are you beginning to get an idea of what it means to be holy?

Holy means to be separate or set apart. It means to be in a different class altogether, to be completely other from the norm. I once read an article in which a woman named Anne described when she was going through grade school and had to learn to write in cursive. I know our government doesn’t require public schools to learn that way of writing any more, but some of our private Lutheran schools still do. She said she and her classmates had to practice over and over again with a pencil until they got it right. And *then*, once they consistently got it right, the teacher gave them permission to use a *pen*. “Anne can now use the pen,” the teacher said, and her classmates applauded. She was now set apart from her classmates, in a special class all her own.

That’s the idea behind *holy*, only we’re not talking about trivial things like pencil versus pen. We’re talking about sinful versus sinless. We’re talking about things that make the heaven and the earth shake, things that don’t matter just for a time, but for all eternity. That’s why Isaiah goes on to say, “I am doomed! I am ruined, because I am a man with unclean lips, and I dwell among a people with unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies!” Isaiah realizes he’s out of place. He is looking at a Being who is so distinguished, so apart, so other than he is, that he should not be able to see so much as his shadow. He thinks that he should in fact be doomed and destroyed and cease to exist because this Being exists.

But the fact that the Lord is so great and awesome, high and exalted, sinless and perfect that Isaiah is afraid to come near him or even to look at him really isn’t what makes the Lord holy or sets him apart, is it? After all, if you were that kind of being, wouldn’t you do the same?

Look at people who are truly set apart from ordinary humanity by their riches. What do they do? Share an apartment with friends above a downtown shop? No, they build huge mansions at the end of long driveways in wooded and secluded areas or up on top of a hill in the mountains, so that people are in awe and are afraid to go near.

Look at people who are truly set apart from ordinary humanity by their talent or fame. What do they do? Eat at McDonald’s or Winner Chicken Dinner? Order pizza from Casey’s? No,

they hire chefs or eat at exclusive restaurants made for people just like them who want to be left alone.

So if that were all God did—sit on his high and exalted throne, make our jaws drop at his huge robe and our heart skip a beat at the singing of his attendants, and scare the daylights out of everyone who came near—then he would not be truly holy. He would in fact be just like everyone else, just like sinful humanity.

Here's what makes God holy: "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, carrying a glowing coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with the coal and said, 'Look, this has touched your lips, so your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.'" God isn't sinless and set apart just for the fun of being sinless and set apart, just for the fun of being better than everyone else. God is sinless and set apart to share his sinlessness and set-apartness with sinful and unclean humanity. God is holy to share his holiness. God takes away sin.

But he doesn't just say, "Oh, quit your fussing and worrying and trembling. Your sin is taken away." No, there is a price for our sin. But he pays it. He says, "Your sin is forgiven *or* atoned for." His servant the seraph takes a coal from the altar to touch Isaiah's lips. The altar is where blood was spilled day after day, where life was taken day after day to atone for sin. And this was all a foreshadowing of the day when *the* blood would be spilled, when *the* Life would be taken—the blood and life of Jesus. Jesus atoned for all sin. Jesus has reconciled us to God. Jesus has bridged the gap between such a tremendously great and glorious God and sinful people.

This is what makes God truly holy and set apart. He does what no one else would do, what no one especially would ever dream of a holy God doing. He comes to earth, that we might dwell with him in heaven. He becomes mortal, that we might be immortal. He takes our selfish and self-serving sin, that we might share in his holiness. He dies, that we might live. *That* is a holy, holy, holy LORD—the Father who created us and sent his Son, the Son who became our substitute and won our salvation, and the Holy Spirit who makes it known to us and gives us faith to believe it.

And you know how else we know that that's what the Lord's holiness means? Look at the complete about-face Isaiah does. "Then I heard the Lord's voice, saying, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?'—And notice both the *I*, singular, and the *us*, plural.—"Then I said, 'Here I am. Send me!'"

Isaiah goes from being a trembling sinner to a joy-filled saint, just as eager to serve God with all that he is and has as the seraphim are.

And doesn't the message of the triune God's holiness prompt us to do the same? Which of you doesn't want to give glory to Jesus, who has bridged the gap between God's holiness and our sinfulness? Which of you doesn't want to tell others about him?

God has given you the opportunity to do so. He commands parents, especially fathers, to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Recommit to this today and say, "Here I am! Send me!"

God commands all of you to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have and to let your joy-filled light in Christ shine in all that you do. Recommit to this today and say, "Here I am! Send me!"

After all, we have a holy, holy, holy LORD. We have a Lord who has made it so that, through faith in Jesus his Son, one day we will not have to crane our necks to see him as Isaiah did. No, in heaven we will see him face to face from his right hand, because through the blood of Jesus he has made us just as high and exalted and holy as he is. The triune God bring us all safely there. Amen.