

# The Holy Trinity

## Isaiah 6:1-8

May 30, 2021

And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Isaiah 6:7

### A Fire of Holiness

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and

from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We give thanks and praise to God for all the blessings we enjoy in the here and now, for all that He daily and abundantly provides for us, and for his protection against all danger and evil. From the Small Catechism we learn that He does this "only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." The Psalms are filled with this praise, as in Psalm 145: "I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable."<sup>1</sup> But there is something to be even more thankful for than His good gifts, there is another even greater reason to praise God than for what He graciously provides for us, and that is God Himself.

This kind of praise and thanksgiving is centred on who He is. Of course the Holy Scriptures also speak of this, as we heard in the appointed Psalm for today:

<sup>1</sup> Ps 145:1-3.



“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness.”<sup>2</sup> This is what our observance of Holy Trinity Sunday is about – proclaiming who our God is, and giving Him the praise and honour due to His Holy Name.

The remarkable passage we have from Isaiah chapter six leads us in this direction as we hear of the prophet’s encounter with “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.”<sup>3</sup> Here Isaiah finds the Lord God of Sabaoth sitting not among smiling, plump, endearing cherubim but instead surrounded by heavenly beings called “seraphim.” The only other place we encounter this Hebrew word is in Numbers 21 when the Lord sends fiery serpents – *seraphim* – in judgment to the people of Israel, in order that they would repent from their sins and turn back to the Lord their God. This same word describes the heavenly beings Isaiah beholds in the dwelling of the Lord, these awesome creatures of fire flying above the throne, who cover their face and their feet as they sing the praises of God to one another: ““Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”<sup>4</sup> Right away we encounter the nature of this God in this threefold cry of “Holy.” God alone is Holy, and He is one God in three Persons. God the Father is Holy. God the Son is Holy. God the Holy Spirit is Holy. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts! In this cry of the seraphim we see that holiness must be ascribed to

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<sup>2</sup> Ps 29:1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Is 6:1.

<sup>4</sup> Is 6:3.

God alone. The holiness of the Triune God is not just an ethical quality – in other words, His holiness is not just a perfect example of morality. Rather, it is the very nature of His essence that exists separate and apart from everything that is defiled and profane. The Triune God’s holiness is His hidden glory, and His glory that fills all the earth is His holiness. Knowing this how can we do anything but join with St. Paul in the same worship as those heavenly beings: “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.”<sup>5</sup>

But then immediately we see that Isaiah has a problem. A big problem. In fact so do we, and so does the entire world. For just as soon as Isaiah grasps the essential nature of God’s character, that He is holy, then he must confront where he stands in relation to God. In the case of the prophet he is actually right there in the Lord’s presence, and as he takes in the sight of the fiery seraphim who call out to one another “the foundations of the thresholds shook...and the house was filled with smoke.”<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt, God alone is holy. But Isaiah is not. Neither are we. All people and whatever all people do are completely defiled in sin. The world stands opposed to righteousness, and therefore the world stands opposed to God as His enemies. All at once the prophet comes to the realization of his standing before God, and so Isaiah can only cry out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”<sup>7</sup>

St. Peter had the same reaction when he first encountered the Incarnate Son of

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5 1 Ti 1:17.

6 Is 6:4.

7 Is 6:5.

God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, that day by the Sea of Galilee, when a poor night's fishing suddenly became a miraculous abundance of full nets: "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'"<sup>8</sup> The essential character of the Triune God is holiness. When we are confronted with the reality of defilement and depravity then we come to understand that God's is holy, and we are not. But without holiness we are lost, for we may not be in the presence of God, dwelling instead in the midst of a world that has forsaken the good gifts of the Creator and lusts after idols and corruption.

Within this context the words of Isaiah become the words of all those who repent: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"<sup>9</sup> But what we need goes beyond purification of our lips. It even goes beyond any form of ritual purification like the sacrifices God gave to His people through Moses. Sin and defilement must be completely removed if we ever want to be reconciled with God. But God has not left us on our own to figure this out – which is really good news because there is nothing we can do! Instead He takes the initiative. He brings us the good gifts that we need, He reaches down and brings us up out of that defilement and gives us the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. After the shock and recognition of his depravity that came on like a ton of bricks there in the dwelling of the Most High, Isaiah now receives the grace that that

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<sup>8</sup> Lk 5:8.

<sup>9</sup> Is 6:5.

Lord of Hosts freely offers. The seraphim, the same awesome fiery creature that earlier sparked terror and loathing, now takes a burning coal from the altar, and the prophet says, “he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”<sup>10</sup> The coal comes from the altar, the place of fire and burnt offerings. In the Bible fire is a “I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news” story. For fire can destroy but it can also cleanse.

Deuteronomy says “the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”<sup>11</sup>

“[F]ire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed” Sodom.<sup>12</sup> Jesus says, “<sup>6</sup>If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”<sup>13</sup> Yet that same fire is a fire of righteousness, and only the unrighteous are devoured in it. So St. Paul instructs the church in Thessalonica, “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> And then here is the really good news: by fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit, those who repent and believe in faith are made to be holy, restored in the image of God, all given to us for the sake of Christ, who took on all our defilement and became the One final atoning sacrifice, the propitiation for our sins. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came as promised, when “divided tongues as of fire appeared to [the

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10 Is 6:7.

11 Dt 4:24.

12 Lk 17:28–29.

13 Jn 15:6.

14 2 Th 1:7–8.

disciples] and rested on each one of them.”<sup>15</sup> John the Baptizer foretold of this, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”<sup>16</sup> The forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation we need is now ours, given to us in our Baptism – this is indeed the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, and strengthened in the preaching of the Gospel and in His very Body and Blood, given and shed for you.

The Gospel reading for Trinity Sunday brings us this Trinitarian love story: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”<sup>17</sup> This working of the Triune God, the only One worthy of the threefold praises of “holy, holy, holy” is what makes us “holy, holy, holy.” Each of us, having received the Holy Spirit in Baptism, now bears the righteousness of Christ, and can stand before the Father because our guilt has been taken away, our sins have been atoned for, and now we are set apart to worship and serve Him. Forgiven, cleansed, made holy for the sake of Christ, Isaiah now hears a question: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”<sup>18</sup> The God who is both “I” – one – and “us” – three – asks his sinful servant Isaiah to do an eternally important task, to bring forth the Word of God to His people. Now Isaiah can hear the call, and now he can answer “Here I am! Send me!” Today God continues to call sinful people to go forth and bring His Word to a world that turns its back on His glory. He calls

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15 Ac 2:3.

16 Lk 3:16.

17 Jn 3:16–17.

18 Is 6:8.

pastors to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, and indeed He calls every Christian to a life dedicated to serving Him and one another, knowing that we have this truth: “The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.”<sup>19</sup> May that same fire of the Holy Spirit continue to kindle our faith and keep us steadfast unto eternal life. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Kirk P. Radford  
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✠ Soli Deo Gloria

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<sup>19</sup> Ps 29:7.