

Sermon for Morning Prayer
Trinity Sunday

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“In the year that king Uzziah³ [**Uhz-EYE-uh**] died⁴ I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims [**SAIR-uh-fims**]: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

“Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. Peter.⁵

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus [**PON-tuss**], Galatia [**GAL-ay-shee-uh**], Cappadocia [**CAP-uh-doe-she-uh**], Asia, and Bithynia [**BITH-inn-ee-uh**], Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed be the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹⁸
May 18, 2008.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 6: 1-8 (KJV).

³ Azariah. *Peter R. Ackroyd, The Book of Isaiah*, CHARLES L. LAMON, ED., THE INTERPRETER'S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE 336 (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1971).

⁴ 739-740 B.C. *Gordon B. Duncan, Chronology*, LAMON, *op. cit.* 1272.

⁵ I Peter 1: 1-12 (KJV).

⁶ Isaiah 6: 8 (KJV).

⁷ *Ackroyd, op. cit.* 336.

⁸ *Cf., e.g.,* I Kings 5: 5.

⁹ Isaiah 6: 1 (RSV).

¹⁰ Isaiah 6: 6-7 (RSV).

¹¹ *Cf.,* St. Matthew 5: 8.

¹² *Derek Kidner, Isaiah*, D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDs., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED, 3rd ed. 595 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

¹³ *Cf.,* Hebrews 12: 18-29.

¹⁴ Isaiah 6: 8a (KJV).

¹⁵ Isaiah 6: 8b (KJV).

¹⁶ I Peter 1: 12b (RSV).

¹⁷ I Peter 1: 3-5 (RSV).

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ly retire from the regular exercise of the parish ministry, but he can never retire from the priesthood and therefore can never be wholly free from the need to perform as a priest to the extent his physical abilities permit him to.

Conclusion:

Consider the implications of these principles for those who, in the words of today's Second Lesson, "... preach... the good news ... through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."¹⁶ That good news, St. Peter implies, is the core of the Gospel: "...[W]e have been born anew ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to ...a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."¹⁷

First, as with the placement of Isaiah's vision within the Temple, the source and focus of all true ministry, whether clerical or lay, must be from within the worship of the Church. Prophecy, evangelism, and ritual must all be centered in the community that meets to fulfill its portion of the New Covenant with God.

Second, because we are all sinners, so those of us who are called to God's work in any form need God's forgiveness, not only for our own sakes but as examples to those for whom we work that God will forgive them as well. Therefore we must be diligent in using faithfully the Sacrament of Penance and the other appointed means of grace, again, both for our own benefit and to set an example for others.

Third, for properly prepared Christians, the only appropriate response to God's call for assistance is, with Isaiah, "Here am I; send me."

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Introduction:

Isaiah opens his book of prophecy by calling down denunciations upon Jerusalem, the capital of the southern Kingdom of Judah, in the divided Hebrew nation, and upon the leaders and people of that kingdom. The cause of God's displeasure with Judah is the nation's perverseness in worshipping God, a faithlessness which threatens it with a judgement worse than any it had previously experienced.

Yet even in the midst of this stern correction, God through Isaiah offers His promise of forgiveness and extends the hope that the nation, through a faithful remnant, may be restored to its former faithfulness, after which Jerusalem may become a blessing to the whole world.

Theme:

It is only after Isaiah delivers this introduction to his message – something akin to the riveting blurb on a book's dust jacket – that he turns to giving an account of how he became the messenger who was chosen to deliver it. He tells us he was standing in the Temple at Jerusalem, probably attending the rites of worship on some major feast day, when he had a vision from God.

The details of this vision – both of how it came about and of its specific contents – are grounds for some useful reflections on the ever-recurring process of transmitting God's words to an unwilling world.

Development:

1. **Isaiah's vision unites the earthly Temple, God's lodging place on Earth, with Heaven, God's permanent residence.⁷**

We know that Isaiah's vision occurred in the Temple, which was God's "official" residence here on Earth,⁸ because he says that in this vision, the Lord's "train filled the temple".⁹ It is significant that Isaiah's commissioning as an accredited messenger of God took place in the nation's most central place of worship and during one of the rites of worship that validated Judah both as a community and as an heir to the Covenant with God. Thus the location and timing of this vision certified both Isaiah's credentials as a prophet and of the authenticity of the message he was charged to deliver.

2. The messenger God chose to deliver His words to His people was a sinful man, just like his audience, so before he could be commissioned, he had to be cleansed.

Isaiah tells us, "Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.'"¹⁰

This symbolized that Isaiah was forgiven, and thus had become an appropriate person to be the chosen messenger;¹¹ it also symbolized that, like him, those to whom he was sent could hope for similar forgiveness for themselves. As one commentator has put it: "It is integral to Isaiah's message that his words will be those of a forgiven man, himself as guilty as those to whom he will offer life or death."¹²

Not least, Isaiah's burning coal is also a *type*, an Old Testament foreshadowing of a New Testament revelation. In fact, it is the *type* for at least two New Testament *antitypes*.

As this coal was the sign of Isaiah's forgiveness and cleansing, so is it the *type* of the New Testament's central message of the forgiveness and redemption that Jesus Christ brings to us through His Sacrifice of Himself.¹³ As this coal

was both the sign of Isaiah's prophetic task and the means of cleansing him to make him fit for that task, so it is the *type* of Our Lord's institution of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which confers on its recipient both the authority to perform his Office and the Grace needed for its exercise.

3. Once Isaiah was spiritually prepared to be a prophet, he had no choice but to answer God's call to him.

As soon as Isaiah received the angel's touch with the burning coal, that is, as soon as he was cleansed from his sins and given the power to utter the message God had prepared for him to deliver, God called for a messenger: "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"¹⁴

Upon hearing this call, Isaiah immediately responded by "volunteering" his own services for the cause: "Then said I, Here am I; send me."¹⁵ I suggest to you that once the angel of the Lord touched Isaiah, giving him the capacity to perform the task to which God would call him, that angel also instilled in him the need to perform that task. Hence his immediate response to the Lord's call.

I believe this to be true also of the actual grace that is conveyed in the Sacrament of Holy Order: it gives the ordinand the *capacity* to perform the Office of the ordained clergy, but it also instills the *need* to perform it. For example, so far as I have been able to observe, men who have once been ordained but who have then left off the exercise of the ministry, such as Roman Catholic priests who have been "laicized" in order to marry, always seem to have about them something that is fundamentally unsettled, never completely at peace.

This is also why the concept of a "retired priest" always seems to me highly anomalous. A priest may eventual-