

7 February 2010  
Epiphany 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Isaiah, Peter, You”

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 14:12b-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

When we sinful human beings come face to face with the holiness of God, we cannot endure it. The example I often use to describe this is that our sin is like filthy, gasoline-soaked clothes, and the holiness of God is fire. If you bring the two together, it is not going to be a good result.

That is the reason for the fear we heard from Isaiah and Peter today. Isaiah is given a vision of heaven, and the glory and holiness of God. And he is terrified. He does not try to speak to God or ask anything, he simply cries 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; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”** Isaiah knows he is sinful and unclean. The uncleanness of his heart has become the uncleanness that has burst forth from his lips, and so he cannot join the song of the angels. His sin has not only disqualified him from being in the presence of God, it is a death sentence. **Woe is me**, he says. **I am lost**.

This was the situation also for Peter on the Lake of Gennesaret that day. He too comes into the presence of the holiness and awesome power of God. They had been out fishing all night and caught nothing. Yet at Jesus’ command, they go back out, and at Jesus’ command, the fish swim into their nets, so that they catch not just a normal amount of fish, but a miraculous catch of fish. And Peter knows it. And his sinfulness and uncleanness weighing heavy upon him, Peter falls down at Jesus’ knees and says: **“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”**

And this same is true for you and me. Who among us is able to come into the presence of a holy God? Our hearts are unclean as we covet and grumble. Our lips are unclean as we speak hurtful and angry words. Our minds are unclean as we think the worst of others. Our bodies and hands and feet are unclean as we do what we should not do and fail to do what we should. Or maybe to use the words of St. Paul for today, instead of being **infants in evil** and **mature in our thinking**, we are *infants in our thinking* and *mature in our evil*.

But while Isaiah and Peter were right, they were also wrong. For while Isaiah was

indeed unclean, he was not lost. For in the depth of his sin and fear, **“one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with 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 atoned for.”**” For the Lord did not bring Isaiah before him in this vision to destroy him, but to save him. And he is saved by the offering upon the altar. When it touches his lips, his sin and guilt and uncleanness are gone. He is given new life and hope.

And the same happens for Peter. He was right in confessing that he is a sinful man, but the Lord will not depart from him and leave him in his sin. Instead, Jesus says to him: **“Do not be afraid.”** Or in other words, do not be afraid of being in the presence of the Lord, for Jesus has not come to destroy, but to save. To save by being the offering that touched Isaiah’s lips from the altar of the cross. To save by being the sacrifice for guilt and the atonement for sin as the Lamb of God. To give Peter - and all the world - new life and hope. And the words that came from Jesus’ lips and touched Peter’s ears did for Peter what they said. They did not inspire Peter to boldness and confidence; rather, they gave him boldness and confidence.

And so it is for you and me. At the beginning of each Divine Service, we take our place with Isaiah and Peter and confess that we are sinful and unclean. We cry out **Woe is me, I am lost.** A lost and condemned person. We confess that we have no right to be here, and *deserve only temporal and eternal punishment.* But as with Isaiah and Peter, our Lord comes to us not to destroy or condemn us, but to forgive and save us. And so like Peter, His words: *“I forgive you all your sins.”* touch our ears and raise us to new life and hope. And like Isaiah, the sacrifice from the altar of the cross touches our lips as we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus in His Supper, and our guilt and uncleanness are gone. Gone, for *they* are taken by our Lord, and we are given His holiness and life.

And so Isaiah and Peter were mightily transformed. Isaiah’s **Woe is me!** is replaced with **“Here am I! Send me!”** And Peter’s **Depart from me** is replaced with his clinging to Jesus - **leaving everything and following** Him, to be a *fisher of men.* Yet this is not the only wonder. For is it not also a wonder that these are the very men our Lord *wants* to send and use. God does not look for holiest and best and most righteous of men. He does not seek the strongest and most steadfast. Rather, he takes an unknown like Isaiah and an ordinary fisherman like Peter, and uses them to proclaim His Word as prophet and apostle.

And what a prophet Isaiah was! He is sometimes called “the fifth Evangelist,” for his words contain so many prophecies of the coming Saviour and His work. Isaiah speaks so vividly of the cross and the Suffering Servant - the very coal which touched his lips and took away his sin. Peter’s role among the apostles is also well-known. And even though he keeps messing up - jumping out of the boat and

sinking, rebuking Jesus, and then denying Him three times, just to name a few - our Lord uses him in great and wondrous ways. It is Peter's sermon that is recorded for us in Acts - the very first Christian sermon after the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

And in the same way have *you* been mightily transformed. For the love, forgiveness, and life of Jesus is not without power. And though you are not the holiest, the best, the strongest, the most steadfast, or the most righteous - our Lord will now use you. He may not have called you to be a prophet like Isaiah, or an apostle or "fisher of men" like Peter. But our Lord has called you to be a father or mother, and speak His Word to your children. He has called you to be a friend and neighbor, to serve with His love. He has called you to be a boss or worker, to provide for others through you. He has called you to be a Christian, to speak His Word of forgiveness. And in these vocations, you are just as important as Isaiah or Peter. And Jesus is using you in ways that are both known to you and unknown to you.

And so on this penultimate Sunday of the Epiphany season, we see that the Almighty God of heaven, the Holy God that struck fear into the heart of Isaiah, has come down to earth in the person of Jesus - the God who can even command fish to swim into nets. But He comes not in terror, but to save. Not to make us depart, but to draw us near. To take our uncleanness and make it His, and in return, give us His holiness, that we may be holy.

And the result? We now do what Isaiah could not - we join the song of the angels which they sang around the throne of God. For as we come to His altar, He is here for us, in grace and mercy, to forgive. And so we sing with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven: ***"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"***

And we are not lost, but found.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.