

Holy God! Holy Church?

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the holiness of God and the holiness of the church, and how the church can experience renewal through coming to terms with God and themselves.

Duration: 29:29

Scripture: Isaiah 6

Topics: "Holiness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by describing a powerful encounter with God in the temple, where the sound of voices shook the doorposts and thresholds and the temple was filled with smoke. The speaker acknowledges their own sinfulness and unworthiness in the presence of the Lord. They then recount a vision of a seraph flying with a live coal from the altar, which touched the speaker's lips and symbolized the forgiveness of their guilt and atonement for their sin. The speaker reflects on the trivialization of God in modern times and emphasizes the need for reverence and awe in worship. They also discuss the importance of a holy Church and holy ministers in carrying out God's work. The sermon concludes with a reading from Isaiah chapter 6, highlighting the holiness and glory of the Lord.

Transcript

It is always a delight to come home to Knox Church. Thank you, Kevin, for your warm welcome, and it's good to see so many friends here this evening. I'm delighted to be here, and particularly delighted to be here to share and to participate in this twentieth anniversary celebration of the work of the Renewal Fellowship.

Let's turn our attention now to God Wood, shall we, as we read from a wonderful passage in the Old Testament from Isaiah chapter 6, reading the chapter from verse 1 through to the end of verse 13. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings.

With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. Woe to me, I cried, I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips,

and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

And with it he touched my mouth and said, See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, Here am I, send me.

He said, Go and tell this people, the ever hearing but never understanding, the ever seeing but never perceiving, make the heart of this people callous, make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. Then I said, For how long, O Lord? And he answered, Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitants, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.

And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the tenements and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land. Amen.

May God bless to us this reading from his word this evening. Let's bow in prayer, shall we? Prepare our hearts and our minds, O Lord, to receive your word this evening. Silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing your word we may also obey your will for our lives.

Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen. My earliest memories of being a Presbyterian go back to my childhood.

When I was about seven years old, my family joined the local Presbyterian church after having belonged to churches in the Dutch Calvinist tradition. And I remember how in that congregation where we joined every Sunday morning, the Sunday morning service began the same way. The minister mounted the pulpit steps and gave the call to worship.

And then the choir and the entire congregation would rise to their feet. They would stand and they would sing the words that we've just sung now. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.

Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee. Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty God in three persons, blessed Trinity. This evening we're celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Renewal Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

And when I was thinking about the message for this evening, for this service, I thought about a number of different themes that might be worth pursuing. But I kept coming back and I believe and hope it was the Lord bringing me back to this theme of the holiness of God and also the holiness of the church. And I had this question in my mind, does the Presbyterian Church in Canada still believe in the holiness of God? And does the Presbyterian Church in Canada still long to be a holy church? And what role has the Renewal Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church played in answering these questions or in bearing witness to this reality of the holiness of God and the holiness of the church? The holiness of the church is at the very core, it seems to me, of what we mean by renewal when we talk about the renewal of the church.

Because the holiness of the church is one of the marks of the church, one of the marks of the true church when it is being faithful. We confess that we believe in one holy Catholic or universal and apostolic church. And the holiness of the church refers to the purity of the church's faith and life, its doctrine and its practice.

And the holiness of the church is the ongoing sanctification of the church. In one sense, the church as the people of God are already holy because we have been justified by grace through faith in Christ and Christ is the Holy One and we are holy in Him. But in another real sense, the church must also become holy so that the church will in reality reflect its confession so that in reality it becomes more and more consistent with what we have been declared to be a holy people, as Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2. And so the renewal of the church in a very real sense is the continuous, ongoing sanctification of the church, its reformation, its revitalization, its conversion, its evangelization, if you like, being confronted again and again, over and over again with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and with the Lordship of Christ.

And it seems to me that renewal movements spring up in the life of the churches when the churches have lost their way on this journey of sanctification, on this journey of becoming holy, of becoming Christlike. And so tonight I want to suggest to you that renewal is about holiness and renewal is about the ongoing sanctification of the church and the renewal of the church from beginning to end is about God's work in our midst, and it begins with the holiness of God. And Isaiah records such a vision for us in this sixth chapter of this prophetic book, a vision which the prophet had of God, the holy, living God.

And as you know, Isaiah 6 is the prophet's call and it's the prophet's commission to be a servant of God. And we're told that the vision and the call came in the year that Isaiah died, the year that the king died. Now, there's really nothing unusual about this, in the sense that often the prophets noted the historical timing or the historical context of their call.

But I want to suggest to you tonight that there's something more going on here than a mere historical marker. Because King Isaiah was a popular king. He had been an effective king.

His 57-year reign had brought stability and security to Israel, and now he had died. And there was a tremendous sense of uncertainty and fear among the people concerning their future. What would their future be like? The people of God seemed to be losing their way.

What were they to do now? Who would lead them? How would they face a future which indeed left bleak? Now, if they did what we tend to do in the church today, they probably would have called for a consultation, or a think tank, or a series of committee meetings. They would have perhaps developed some new programs, or perhaps initiated some new strategies, or perhaps hired a consultant. But that's not what goes on here.

Isaiah is in the temple. We're not told why he's in the temple, but he's there perhaps to worship, perhaps to wait upon God. The king of Israel may have died, but the real king of Israel, the Holy One, was very much alive.

The throne of Israel may have been empty, but the throne of heaven, as Isaiah was to discover, was still occupied. And in the midst of the uncertainty, and in the midst of the transition, and in the midst of this political upheaval, what happened is that God came down. The living, the sovereign, the Holy One, revealed Himself to Isaiah.

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord. And I want to suggest to you tonight that Isaiah's day is not unlike our own day, in the culture and in the church. The church in Canada, in many ways, faces an uncertain future.

The Presbyterian church in Canada has seen better days. We've struggled, even within the Renewal Fellowship, within the Presbyterian church, longing to see renewal, and haven't always seen it in the way that we might expect. But here, we're reminded that Isaiah saw the Lord.

And this is always the beginning of renewal. It does not begin with us. It begins with God.

It is not about us. It is about God. It doesn't begin with the church.

It begins with God. And the church will never be holy, and the church will never be renewed, and the church will never be converted, and the church will never be sanctified, somehow because it cleanses itself. But rather, it becomes holy as it experiences the power and the presence of the God to whom it belongs, and for whom it lives.

The holiness of the church rests in the fact that it belongs to God, and we are holy only insofar as we participate in the life of the living God. And so Isaiah's vision, I suggest to you this evening, and Isaiah's response to this vision gives us some clues about what it means to be confronted by a holy God today, and what it means to be a holy church, and what renewal might look like, what shape it might take in our own day. First of all, I want us to notice that Isaiah had to come to terms with God in verses 1 to 4. Now, whatever you make of these four verses, and however you interpret them, one thing is very clear.

This is a picture unlike any we might normally experience in this world. Isaiah sees God on a throne. Words almost fail him to describe this vision.

High and exalted, the presence of God fills all of the available space, and even much more, there's a sense of heaviness and fullness of the glory of God, and God's accompanied by a heavenly train of those who worship God. There is noise, and clatter, and speaking, and shaking, and smoke, and whatever was happening was but a mere reflection of the fullness, of the weightiness of God's presence in the heavens and in the fullness of the earth and among God's people. And Isaiah knew that he was dealing with a God who could not be trivialized, or a God who could not be domesticated, or a God who could not be contained.

This was a God who was wholly set apart, a mysterious and majestic presence, and he was attracted and yet also repulsed at the same time by this overwhelming sense of the Lord's presence in his midst. And I want to suggest to you tonight that the Presbyterian Church in Canada, that the Church today must come to terms with God in a fresh way, in a new way, in a real way. In a book called *The Tribulization of God*, the author describes what it might be like in the average church, the average, perhaps, Presbyterian church on any given Sunday.

This is what he says, Visit a church on Sunday morning, almost any will do, and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences, but you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher, unsure whether the sermon will go over. The only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing the operatory.

The New Testament warns us, Offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire. But reverence and awe have often been replaced by a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding a bit of religious atmosphere,

perhaps, but no heat, no blinding light, no power for purification.

And when the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church in our time is the trivialization of God. It's interesting in my work at McGill University, where I teach some theology courses, I often meet students who want to talk about God. They want to talk about spirituality.

They want to talk about mystery. They want to talk about awe. But at the same time, they don't have very much time for the church, and they don't want to talk about the church, because somehow they don't see the institutional church as a place where they can meet this kind of a God, or they don't find that the church talks about God in these terms.

Tonight, we give thanks for the ministry of the Renewal Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We celebrate 20 years of ministry. But one of the questions we need to ask ourselves, those of us who are involved in this renewal work, do we also get caught up with the institutional church? Do we also get caught up with talking about the church all the time, but not talking about God? A.W. Poser said that what comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

And whenever the church goes into decline, he says it almost always can be traced to the fact that it gets the answer to the question wrong, who is God, and what is God like? The New Testament reminds us that the reflection of God's glory and holiness, God's transcendent majesty appeared unbroken in the face of Jesus Christ. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 says we have the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and we're in the post-Easter season where we celebrate the risen Christ, ascended to the right hand of the Father, glorified, interceding for us, reigning and ruling as Lord of the church and Lord of all creation. He is the Holy One.

He is the glorious One to which the Scriptures point, to whom the creeds of the church point, who is alive in our midst today. Are we walking with Him as a church? Are we walking with Him as a fellowship? We have to come to terms with God in a fresh way. But secondly, I want you to notice that Isaiah also had to come to terms with himself, with his own life and with the life of his people in verses 5-7.

When confronted by God, Isaiah got a whole new perspective on his life, and it was almost too much to bear. Notice what he does. He cries out in despair, but he doesn't shrink from self-knowledge.

We often do that. We may cry out in despair, but we shrink from self-knowledge. He knew he was seeing himself for what he was, the way that God saw him.

A man of unclean lips, someone who lived in a world of ruin, in a world that was not the way that it was supposed to be, among people who were filled with pride and sloth and falsehood. He shared in the brokenness of his people, in the brokenness of the covenant people, in the brokenness of God's creation. He experienced the holiness of God which, in a sense, repelled him and forced him to see himself for what he was, and his world for what it was, and God's people for what they were.

But he also experienced that holiness, the holiness of God, in a way that did not leave him there. One of the seraphs touched his mouth with a burning alive coal, a symbol of cleansing, a symbol of refining fire, and Isaiah's guilt was taken away and Isaiah's sin is atoned for. And he's prepared for the work that he's about to be called to.

I want to suggest to you tonight that the Church of Jesus Christ must come to terms with itself in our day if there's ever going to be the blessing of God's renewal. In the opening pages of the Institute's John Calvin, you didn't think you were going to get out tonight without a quote from Calvin, did you? Calvin begins with these famous words, All the wisdom that we possess consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves. And we usually take Isaiah 6, and we usually take those words of Calvin in the Institute, and we apply them individually to our lives, personally.

But I want us to think about them tonight in terms of the Church, in terms of the people of God. There can be no renewal of the people of God until the Church comes to terms with itself in the presence of the God who is the Holy One. Now, there's not much holy about the Church today, is there, if we think about it? In the world, we think about the scandals of sexual abuse by clergy everywhere in the newspapers today.

We think about the residential schools here in Canada. We think about divided churches, people at war with each other within congregations over all kinds of things, theology and liturgy, forms of worship. We think about the doctrinal erosion, the lack of theological orthodoxy, and on and on the list goes.

There's not much holy, it seems, about the Church today. And the Presbyterian Church in Canada is not immune from this, and evangelicals within the Presbyterian Church in Canada are not immune from this. To what extent have we remained faithful? Have we remained faithful to our confession of Christ as Lord? Are we willing to pay the price to make that confession? To the authority of Scripture? For the creeds and for the confessions of our tradition? To what extent have we as evangelicals, to what extent have we who are committed to renewal, yet also participated in the brokenness of the Church? To what extent does a congregation like Knox, this wonderful congregation that I love so dearly, also participate in the brokenness and the failure and the frailty of the Church? Robert Murray McShane was 27 years old when he wrote these words to a newly ordained missionary friend.

He said, it is not great talent God blesses as much as likeness to Jesus. The holy ministry he wrote is an awful weapon in the hand of God. God's looking for holy ministers today, but God is also looking for a holy Church.

What an instrument a holy Church can be in the hands of God. A Church committed to continuing, ongoing sanctification. James Denny once said that you cannot give the impression both that you are a great creature and that Jesus Christ is a great Savior.

You pick one or the other. And a Church can't be a great Church in and of itself unless it's always pointing to the One who is its Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ. We must come to terms with ourselves and what God is calling us to be in these days.

And then thirdly, I want to suggest to you that Isaiah received somewhat willingly, but also with some questions the call and the commission that God gave him in verses 8-13. Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord calling him and he willingly responds, I will go, here am I, send me. But notice that the message that Isaiah was told to deliver was certain to be unpopular.

It was a message which pointed to the resistance of God's people to the will of God. Isaiah is told, they will not hear, they will not understand, they will not see. We live at an incredibly unusual and difficult time in the life of the church where even within the church there seems to be this resistance to the things of God.

But I want you to notice in a strange and providential way, and in a somewhat ironic way, the resistance to the message seems to be part of God's purpose and plan. Now how that is and why that is, only God knows. But the resistance is the means through which God's judgment will be displayed and God's redemptive purposes will be accomplished and the seed will be planted that will flourish in the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ.

God uses stubborn, unholy, broken, frail, failing people. People who continue to resist His will for the accomplishment of His purpose. And that, my friends, is the irony.

The irony is that the unholiness of the church, its brokenness, may be the very means through which God's judgment is exercised and the means through which God's redemptive purposes are accomplished. God will be God despite us. God will be God despite the church.

God will be God. God's purposes will be accomplished. And so what is God calling the Renewal Fellowship to be and to do in the future? I'd like to suggest that one of its most important ministries is to witness to this truth, that God will be God.

That the Ascender of Jesus will reign. That He will be Lord of the church and Lord of creation no matter how much we seek to resist Him. That the Holy Spirit will continue to bear witness in the hearts of people that Jesus is Lord, that Scripture is the Word of God, and that people may share in the life of the Triune God of Grace despite what we may do.

You see, tonight we're celebrating God's faithfulness. And God's faithfulness is often and most often manifested despite our unfaithfulness. And so when it comes to the church, when it comes to the Presbyterian Church in Canada, I'm neither a pessimist nor an optimist.

I don't believe the church is going to hell in a handbasket, but I also don't believe that revival is just around the corner. But what I do believe is that God is calling us afresh and anew to be His people. A chosen people, a holy people, a people set apart for Him, belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.

God's purposes will be accomplished. Renewal will come. Whether we resist it or not, whether we welcome it or not, God will be God.

It's not going to be business as usual. Renewal is not about simply recovering the past. It is about what God is doing and what God desires to do in our midst, and it begins with a recovery of a vision of who God is.

The Holy One. The holiness of God. To the extent that the Renewal Fellowship has borne witness to this truth over the past twenty years, we give thanks to God in that it should continue to bear witness to this truth in the future.

We pray to God. Let us pray. Holy and loving God, You have revealed Yourself the glory of who You are in the person of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

And by Your Holy Spirit, You continue, by Your grace, to make the revelation of Your Son known to men and to women and to young people and to children. We pray Your Holy Name. We pray for our denomination, Presbyterian Church in Canada.

We pray for the Renewal Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We pray for congregations across this land, for presbyteries and synods and for the upcoming General Assembly. Gracious, loving, holy God, be merciful to us.

We pray in Jesus' name.

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