



SIX SANE TRUTHS FOR A CRAZY WORLD PART 3: WHAT ISAIAH SAW

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This morning we are half way through our series of six sane truths for a crazy world. What is it about God that we can hang on to when life is out of control? There are probably way more than six things, but I think each character quality we're looking at is especially helpful.

So far, we've talked about how God is constant. He never changes, even though everything else does. That's important. Last week we looked at what it means to say that God is in control. When things seem chaotic and we can't understand them, God is still there, and he stays in charge even when it might not look like it.

This morning, we're moving to a new topic, and I'm really glad the kids are in here with us, because I'm going to need some help. In fact, I have a few objects to pass out that I'll use to demonstrate a few points as we go along today. Each bag I'm passing out has a number on it. When I get to your number, I'll need you to come up front and take whatever it is out of the bag. Got it? No peeking.

To start us off I need bags 1, 2 and 3 right away. Come on up front and show us what's inside. We're going to start this morning with a bit of a riddle. I want to know what these three things have in common: a cow, a map of the city of Toledo, and a container of guacamole. Any guesses?

Well, the answer is not much. But people say the same thing about all three. They call them "holy." Holy cow. Holy Toledo. Holy guacamole. Kind of a funny use of the word holy when you stop to think about it. In fact, it doesn't really mean anything when it's used that way.

But that's about as much as some of us use the word holy. It's not one we know a lot about. Which is really too bad, because it's a great word, and it's an important description of God.

If somebody asked you to define the word holy, what would you tell them? Any ideas?

To get to our definition, I want to look at a story from the Old Testament. A man named Isaiah had a vision of God one day that gives us an excellent picture of holiness. Let's take a look.

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died,

Wait just a minute. Who has bag #4? Would you open it up please? You've got a crown. I'd like you to go ahead and put that on to remind me to come back and talk about King Uzziah, because he's important.

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. 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!"

Wow. What an experience. Isaiah got to see something that few people have ever seen, and it shook him up. He was looking at the very throne room of God, so he had good reason to be nervous. Isaiah knew what God had said years and years before to Moses.

Exodus 33:19-20

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence... But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Isaiah knew that seeing God was a dangerous thing – yet here he was, catching a glimpse of the Lord in all his glory. And right there in the center of his vision were these creatures singing about God's holiness.

That's because God's holiness is all tied in with what's dangerous about him. It's not that God should be scary – it's that we need to have a proper respect and understanding of who we're dealing with.

You know, it's one thing to talk about God's holiness and another thing completely to see it firsthand. I'm sure that Isaiah had heard his parents talk about God being holy many, many times. He would have learned the Bible verses early on that mention the "Holy One of Israel". But he had never experienced anything like this before. This direct encounter with God's holiness put everything in different perspective, and it ended up changing his life.

What is it that Isaiah learned about the word holy? What would he want us to know?

One of the first ideas wrapped up in holiness is the idea that we must respect God's place.

Respect God's Place

To say God is holy means he is set apart. He is separate, he is unique, he is distinctively different than all his creation, and he is not to be treated casually.

Who has bag #5? Let's take a look inside. Oh – it's a plate. I think I have mentioned before that there is a special set of dishes in my family. My great grandfather went to college with President Harding. After he became president, my great grandfather invited him to come to the farm for dinner, and the president accepted the invitation. Well it's a pretty big deal to have that kind of guest at your house, and my great grandparents didn't have much that was fancy, so they sold an entire boxcar load of hay to make enough money to purchase a special set of china for the dinner.

No those plates and cups have come down through the family and my parents currently have them. Growing up, we called it the Harding china, and it only came out of the cupboards on very, very special occasions. The plate you have in your hands today is not one of those plates. Do you know why? Because I would be in really big trouble with my mother if I broke one. They are only to be used for very important dinners because they are set apart. They are holy in a sense – dedicated for use on certain occasions, but not others.

Isaiah started out by telling us that he had this vision in the year that King Uzziah died. That little line goes by pretty fast when you don't know who Uzziah is. But once you hear his story, you can't help but think about how it relates to God's holiness. So let's look for a minute at why we had that crown in bag #4.

From 2 Chronicles 26

Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. His mother's name was Jecoliah; she was from Jerusalem. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done. He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success.

But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of

incense. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. They confronted him and said, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God."

Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him.

King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house - leprosy, and excluded from the temple of the LORD.

Now here's the thing: Uzziah thought to himself, "I'm a good guy. I've been doing what the Lord wants. He's made me successful. We're kind of like pals. I know he said he wanted to have things done a certain way in the temple, but I don't think he'll mind if I go ahead and light the incense myself. We're on good terms. After all, I'm a king, he's a king...it's all good."

God is not to be messed with. Saying he is holy means recognizing, as Steven Curtis Chapman would say, that God is God and I am not. He is separate from his creation.

Even his name is holy. You've heard the expression, "Don't use the Lord's name in vain," and people are usually referring to swearing. But it goes much deeper than that. It means God's name is sacred and full of meaning. When we just throw it around and abuse it, we're making it so it's no longer holy. It's no longer set apart for special use.

In your relationship with God, are you showing him respect? When you pray, do you treat it lightly? Do you act like God owes you something because of who you are?

God isn't just set apart from all creation though. He's set above everything as well. I believe if Isaiah were here, he would not only tell us that God's place should be respected, but it should also be protected.

Protect God's Place

Look again at the very first verse we read:

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.

Isaiah saw this vision of God as deserving to be king. When we call God "holy", we're referring to the fact that he is the God of gods, and the only one worthy of our worship.

Again, it's not an accident that this picture of the Lord is mentioned in conjunction with King Uzziah. We're picking on him a bit today, but one of the complaints mentioned against him in the book of 2 Kings is that for all the good things he did, he didn't put an end to the people worshipping idols. He didn't protect God's rightful place.

In the times of ancient Israel, every country had their own god that they worshipped, sometimes several. When the Israelites would rub shoulders with these different people and cultures, they would start to get interested in these other gods. But God made it pretty clear how he felt about them worshipping anyone but him.

Exodus 34:14

Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Have you ever been jealous of something someone else had? God is jealous when we give our devotion to anyone but him.

Joshua 24:19

He is a holy God; he is a jealous God.

Throughout Scripture, God's holiness is tied to his being the only one deserving worship.

Psalms 77:13

Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?

Now that sounds a little impolite doesn't it? Bragging about how our God is better? We live in a country that goes out of its way to let people worship however and whatever they want. What does it mean for us to protect God's rightful place as the holy one deserving worship? Does God want us to try to pass laws that make it illegal to worship any other god?

I think the answer is there in the Old Testament. God was talking to the Israelites, his chosen people, when he gave instructions about worship. As much as God deserves the worship of all his creation, he wasn't really telling Israel to go out and enforce the rules on the rest of the world. They had enough trouble worrying about following them on their own, let alone getting other countries to go along. God essentially said, "If you're going to be my people, you've got to protect my place in your lives. You've got to keep it holy – just for me."

That's the same for us today as Christians – the spiritual Israel. When it comes to protecting God's place, our job isn't really to look at everybody else – it's to look at ourselves. God says to us, "Worry about your own situation. If you're going to be my people, concentrate on how YOU treat me, how YOU worship. Protect my place in your own thoughts first."

Peter put it this way:

1 Peter 3:15

But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord.

That begins to cut a little closer to home than talk about other religions. If you tell me not to worship other gods, I don't have to think much about it, because I'm not really considering worshipping Hindu gods. I'm not thinking about converting to Islam. But I do find it easy to give my heart away to things besides God. All that I am interested in has the potential of taking over the center of my attention. I have to consciously set Christ apart in my heart, make him holy in it, guard the place he deserves in it.

God's holiness involves respecting his place and protecting his place. It also means we need to do something else. Who has bag #6? Go ahead and open it up.

Do you know what a white glove is used for? The military started this tradition. An officer would come in to the barracks to inspect everything and see if it was clean, and they would wear white gloves for the inspection. Do you know why? We'll give you a demonstration. With your hand that's wearing the glove, run one finger along the floor. What do you see? It's filthy! You can catch any dirt that might show up.

Isaiah didn't know about white gloves, but as he looked at himself in light of God's presence, he knew he wasn't as clean as he should be.

"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."

A final aspect of God's holiness to keep in mind is that we need to

Inspect God's Place

God's holiness is more than a description of his character. It's a description of his actions as well. Everything God does is completely pure and right. There's no dark side to God. And there's no room for dirt and darkness in his presence.

If we're calling God's name, if we're saying we're making a place for him in our hearts, than what we do has to back that up.

1 Peter 1:15-16

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

I love to watch the Olympics – I don't care whether it's the summer Olympics or the winter games. There's something inspiring about watching these incredible athletes who have been so disciplined to get to their peak form.

But there's a flip side to the experience, because the more I admire them, the more it hits home how undisciplined and unathletic I am. I see this huge gap between me and the people on TV.

Isaiah saw God's holiness and realized the huge gap between it and his own life. He knew on a quick inspection that he was not holy. There was sin that had to be dealt with.

The only thing was, Isaiah didn't really have a way to deal with it. He didn't have a solution to the problem – he just knew he was in trouble. And that's where I think the heart of this morning really comes in.

The whole point of this series of messages is to discover things about God that are good to know in a crazy world, so we've got to ask: What does God's holiness have to do with my life? It's nice to know, I can appreciate it about him, but how does it really help me make sense of the chaos?

Isaiah could sympathize with our situation, because he lived through all kinds of craziness, watching his country decline. (Just as a side note, he's the only writer in the Bible who ever even uses the word "chaos.") And it was this encounter with God's holiness that became the pivotal moment of his life.

So what did Isaiah discover that God's holiness does for us?

Let's look briefly at two things it gives, and two things it takes away

What it gives

First, **God's holiness gives perspective.** Isaiah got to see the big picture. The country was grappling with the death of a king, when Isaiah gets to see a much greater king than any human ruler Israel would ever have. Life's problems suddenly took a back seat to what he was looking at.

Sometimes I can become so focused on my own problems and needs that I lose sight of who God is. But if I can take a break long enough to think about God's holiness – this God who is so spectacular and pure and majestic and righteous and powerful and awesome, it can help me gain perspective on my own problems.

Psalm 96:9

*Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.*

We walk through life most of the time caught up in our own stuff. Part of the reason God's holiness helps me in my stuff is that it takes me out of it mentally. It lifts me above the daily stress and into a place where God operates at a different level.

What it takes away

God's holiness takes away my guilt. I love this section we read:

"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. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Remember I said Isaiah didn't have a solution to his problem? He thought he was a dead man. Isaiah had no way to take care of the guilt he was feeling. But God shared his holiness. He took on responsibility for Isaiah's problem. The coal from the altar touched Isaiah's lips – the very symbol of Isaiah of what was wrong in his life. He had said he was a man of unclean lips – meaning the things that came out of his mouth represented all the crud he had inside. And that was where God met him with forgiveness – the very place Isaiah felt the worst about.

God does the same for us through Jesus. We see our problem like Isaiah did, and we don't have anything to do with it. It's his death, his sacrifice that's on the altar before God. We know in our own hearts where we feel the most guilt and shame about things we've done. And Christ's forgiveness is so complete that wherever that is – that's where he meets us. Our deepest, darkest sins are erased and our guilt is taken away. And it is all thanks to God's holiness instead of ours.

What it gives

Let's go back to one more thing God's holiness gives.

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!"

It's hard to believe this is the same Isaiah who was scared to death just a few lines before. He couldn't speak. He thought he was going to die. He was filled with fear.

Then, when his guilt was dealt with, he had a new freedom, and he had a new assignment. **God's holiness gives us a mission.**

Who has our last bag? Could you open it up?

What is a megaphone used for? It's a way of getting people's attention, of speaking a message loud enough so they can hear. Isaiah became God's megaphone to Israel. He became a living reminder to them of the holy God they served, because he had seen him. He had something to say that rang true.

God's holiness sends us on an assignment. When we experience his forgiveness and spend time worshipping him, it gives us the motivation to share that with other people. People sometimes get the idea that living a holy life means pulling away from the rest of the world. But God sends us right back into it. He doesn't take us out of the craziness, but he gives us a new purpose for being there – to share the truth about God with other people who are feeling overwhelmed by life and who need something solid they can stand on.

So as you think about God's holiness and how it relates to you, ask yourself:

1. Am I respecting, protecting and inspecting God's place? Am I giving God the honor he deserves in my life? Does something else take up too much room in my heart – space that really is God's?
2. What do I need from God's holiness – what it gives or what it takes? Do I need perspective? Am I drowning in my own problems and need to be lifted above them? Maybe I feel loaded down with things I've done that I feel bad about, and I need to know that God has taken away my guilt. Do I need a new sense of what my mission is, why he's sent me into the craziness?

The Psalm writer said God's holiness is a cause for worship. This week, take some time to focus in on this holy God – to say God is God and I am not – he's set apart, he's spectacular, he's powerful and he's pure. Let him meet you with his forgiveness, and then be willing to say, "Here I am. Send me. Give me a job. I want to tell the world how great and holy you are."