

SERMON TITLE: "Awesome God: A Holy Encounter"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 6:1-8
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 6, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When I was a senior in high school, a missionary came to speak at my church one evening. I don't remember what country she came from or what she said. All I remember is that she showed us some slides of the people with whom she did her missionary work. When she finished speaking, our pastor asked the ushers to pass the plates so we could give an offering in support of her ministry. While the music was playing and the people were digging out their wallets, I felt overcome by a power greater than myself. While everyone else was wondering whether to put a five or a ten dollar bill in the plate, I felt myself drawn to the front of the church to pray at the kneeling rail. God was calling me to give more than my money. God was calling me to give my life.

You have to understand that that church was much-accustomed to people coming up front to kneel and pray. But usually it was at the urging of the preacher, in the form of an altar call. This time, though, no one had even suggested such a thing. No one, that is, except God.

I can't say that that evening's experience was the single defining moment of my call to ministry. God spoke to me several times over some years. But that night-the-missionary-spoke was one experience I'll never forget. I felt it throughout my body. It was an awesome calling. It was a holy encounter.

Have you ever had a spiritual experience so profound that it changed your life? Throughout this month of February, I want us to focus our attention on those powerful divine connections. We'll be talking about biblical characters from long ago and how even we today are moved and touched by our awesome God. Today we begin with Isaiah, chapter six. Let's see what Isaiah's experience of an awesome God tells us about a holy encounter.

1—EXPERIENCE OF AN AWESOME GOD

Most of us know that Isaiah was a prophet. But, of course, he wasn't a prophet until he became a prophet. What I mean is, there was most likely a time before he or anyone else thought of him that way. He was a boy growing up. Maybe he was a young man working in some occupation like a farmer, a shepherd, or a bricklayer. Possibly, he was a priest in the temple helping with the sacrifices, or maybe he was just a guy who was spiritually minded and interested in God. All we really know from Isaiah 6 is that, one day, Isaiah had a pretty awesome vision of God.

Isaiah's vision could have been a vivid dream while he was asleep in bed, or it could have been a daydream that occurred in some other location. But, from the way Isaiah describes his vision, it's likely that he was physically present in the temple when these things occurred. He probably entered the temple like he had done other times before. Only this time, things were different. Isaiah tells us in verse one that it was the year that King Uzziah died, so maybe Isaiah's experience that day was different because he was grieving for the leader of his nation. Maybe his heart was sad. Maybe he was seeing through tear-filled eyes.

Bible scholars tell us that Isaiah's vision happened in the eighth century before Christ, when Judah and Jerusalem were under threat from Assyria. Maybe it was developments in that geopolitical situation that made things seem different in the temple on this one particular day. Or maybe it was some reason very personal to Isaiah that we could never guess. All we know is that, for some reason, on this particular occasion, Isaiah connected with God's awesome holiness in a new and powerful way.

This time, Isaiah saw the Lord, sitting on a high throne. Around the Lord were seraphs, or angels, with six wings, calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." Like a modern-day rock concert, the sound of their voices caused the temple to shake, and the house of God filled with smoke.

Isaiah's description of what he saw in the temple sounds unusual enough to us that we suppose he saw it more in his mind than through his eyes. But that doesn't take anything away from his spiritual experience. This was a very profound and personal encounter with God that only Isaiah could explain. Only Isaiah knew what his heart and soul were telling him that day, and he described his experience the best way he knew how.

While we may not have had an experience exactly like Isaiah's, I would guess that most of us have had some significant encounters with God's holiness. By that, I mean we've had experiences which were deeply moving and memorable, experiences that have held spiritual meaning and power for us. Usually those kind of encounters engage our emotions as well as our imaginations. They become for us a foundation upon which we build our faith. When asked how we came to believe in God, accept Christ as our Savior, and commit to a life of Christian faith, those are the stories we return to again and again.

Many of my awesome encounters with the holiness of God have come during a worship service. But God's awesome nature is not limited to temples and churches. Many, many times I've marveled at the wonder of God in creation. The beauty of snow-capped mountains, interesting rock formations, and evergreen trees; the sound of rushing water in creeks, rivers, and oceans; and the ripple of golden wheat in the wind are all signs to me of God's holiness. A lightning bolt during a ferocious rainstorm, the Milky Way on a clear summer night, and the tremendous colors of a Utah sunset all touch my senses with divine power. Those kind of natural displays always put me in awe of God.

I don't know what turns you on and gets you excited about God, but I bet something does. Maybe it's music. Maybe it's art. Maybe it's the birth of a baby. Maybe it's an engine that purrs like a kitten. Maybe it's when your favorite sports team wins a victory. Maybe God becomes real to you as you participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion, like we'll be doing later in the service today. God is amazing and wonderful. In profound, personal, and deeply emotional ways, each one of us can experience the holy and awesome nature of God.

2—GOD’S HOLINESS REVEALS OUR SINFULNESS & MAKES US HOLY

Isaiah’s experience in chapter six shows us, however, that our spiritual encounter with God isn’t just about God’s awesome holiness. It’s common in these experiences that we also have a recognition of our own personal sinfulness and shortcomings. After seeing God on the throne, the first words out of Isaiah’s mouth were, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!” So stark was the contrast between God’s holiness and Isaiah’s sinfulness that Isaiah could do nothing but blurt out his guilt. The irony of Christian faith is that the closer we get to God, the more clearly we see our own sins and failings. That’s when the awesome nature of God begins to seem terrifying. It’s a short distance between feeling *awe-filled* and feeling *awful*. An encounter with God’s awesome holiness may cause us to want to run and hide to avoid punishment because we are ashamed of who we are.

Fortunately, God doesn’t leave us cowering in fear or wallowing in guilt. You’ll notice in Isaiah 6:6 that one of God’s angels provided Isaiah with a purifying hot coal. The seraph then declared, “Now that this [hot coal] has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” We may be reluctant to get close to God because we’re afraid that God’s powerful holiness will reveal the depths of our sinfulness. But the truth is that God’s power to forgive is greater than our power to sin. A hymn writer put it this way:

Grace, grace, God’s grace,
 grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
 grace, grace, God’s grace,
 grace that is greater than all our sin!¹

If Isaiah, or we, might wonder if this offer of forgiveness is real, we need look no farther than God’s words to Isaiah in verse eight. Allowing no time for Isaiah to worry or second guess, the Lord immediately affirmed Isaiah’s worthiness by asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah knew that God was speaking to him. In the confidence of God’s awesome, merciful, and cleansing love, Isaiah didn’t hesitate in his reply: “Here I am; send me!”

God's awesome calling is God's way of saying, "I really do believe in you. I really do have confidence that you will do a good job." No matter how guilty we have been, none of us is so bad that God can't forgive and cleanse us. None of us has been so lacking that God can't use us. We don't encounter the holy, recognize our failings, and receive God's grace just to watch from the sidelines like some kind of damaged goods. No way! When God purifies us, God also affirms us by calling us into service. And that's not just for prophets like Isaiah or preachers like me. This is a truth for every Christian. God is an equal opportunity employer, and is eager to use every person available. The call of God is God's way of showing us that we really are forgiven; we really are cleansed; we really are made good enough. By our holy encounter with our awesome God, we are made holy too.

CONCLUSION

Maybe you're familiar with the Bill Gaither song, "He Touched Me." It goes like this:

Shackled by a heavy burden,
neath a load of guilt and shame,
then the hands of Jesus touched me,
and now I am no longer the same.
He touched me, O he touched me,
and O the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened, and now I know,
he touched me and made me whole.²

Next Sunday, I'll include that song in our worship service, so we can sing it. But for now, let's rejoice in how our lives can be changed for the better when we have a holy encounter with our awesome God.

¹"Grace Greater than Our Sin," Julia H. Johnston, 1911. Public Domain.

²"He Touched Me," c. 1963 William J. Gaither. Used by permission of CCLI Licenses #21229713 and #2122970.