

Sermon 1/1/23 - Text: Isaiah 6:1-13

“The Order of Humility”

### Introduction

Sitting to teach – ancient custom, still common in tribal cultures like those in Afghanistan

Introduction – congrats Bud, not a visiting pastor, pride,

If you are new or visiting, we have been considering humility this advent season, how God set aside His own power and glory to come down to earth as a baby in a low place, how He revealed Himself to the outcasts and what kind of kingdom comes from such a Savior. We will consider three things this morning, the place of humility, the posture of humility and the purpose of humility. These things will provide us with hope for the downtrodden, encouragement for the work and a particular reason to appreciate and to anticipate the coming year, especially our time together in worship.

I believe this concludes the advent season series on humility, if not... oops. Otherwise, this isn't a normal exegesis of a passage

There are in Scripture certain passages that once read change your understanding and appreciation of God, His world or your place in it. Programmatic texts that opened my eyes to aspects of the Christian life (e.g. the evil pollution of sin Heb 9, the nature of the worship service Ex 24, the nature of salvation in Rom 8, and of course, most importantly, Lev. 19 with Isa 46 for the Bible's considerations of tattoos.

It is New Years Day, Sunday morning and we are thinking about church, resolutions and so why not pick a relatively obscure text with visions, angels and the call of a prophet to go to God's people with a word of judgment? What could go wrong?

Another year! Great, I am sure I'll get this one right.

740 BC – Tiglath-pileser III sits on the throne of Assyria as the new era of the empire begins to rise. King Uzziah had benefited from its relative decline and Judah had seen peace and stability. Uzziah had sinned as had the people of Judah and their sin had congealed in a stubbornness and hardness of heart. The first 5 chapters of Isaiah summarize the state of play and in chapter 6 we read of Isaiah's call by the Lord to serve as His prophet.

### Place of Humility

It is important to note at the outset that God Himself gives the vision. It comes to Isaiah as a 'call'. And what a sight it was. The LORD God, the Creator of the Universe on a throne, a robe that filled the temple, seraphim ('burning ones') with six wings on guard and flying around singing the Sanctus 'Holy, Holy, Holy', the whole earth shakes and the house of worship is filled with smoke.

As I said, this Vision came to Isaiah 'in the temple' – in other words, Isaiah was 'in church'. This is where the presence of the LORD was commonly seen (as uncommon as it was) and literally the place where earth and heaven meet. It was called 'the footstool of God.'

It seems clear that the throne room of God is revealed. John 12:41 – it was Jesus’s throne that Isaiah saw, interesting we are not really told what Isaiah’s saw, a robe not what was in it but a clear description of the angels.

Have you noticed whenever an angel appears in scripture, ‘Do not be afraid’ or ‘fear not’ – this is because whenever the Bible describes angels, they are heavenly warriors, creatures of great power and glory – they are terrifying, forget the cute, fat baby angels. When I introduce myself, I say, ‘morning, my name is Rob’. When Gabriel comes into the room, He says, ‘calm down everyone, you aren’t going to die.’

And these beings, standing guard and singing praise are hiding their faces and their feet from the glory of God.

What does this have to do with us? Consider for a moment, what it we are doing this morning, each Sunday when we come together. We sing, recite prayers, if you are new, you might be forgiven for thinking what in the world is going on here?

Have any of you read from Augustine’s *Confessions*?

You will notice, and, of course you know if you know the book, that it is cast from start to finish in the form of a conversation with God. It is one of the utterly unique and original things about the book. No one had ever written anything like it. There is no precedent in classical or Christian literature. It’s beginning, words addressed to God, and its continuation in that same vein leads James O’Donnell to say,

“This opening can give rise to the disconcerting feeling of coming into a room and chancing upon a man speaking to someone who isn’t there. He gestures in our direction and mentions us from time to time, but he never addresses his readers. [II, 8-9]

Such is our worship on Sunday morning, singing songs, speaking to someone who isn’t there. Strange it may seem. The Bible impresses a much different reality.

The psalms are full of the importance corporate worship, After David connects the work of the LORD in preserving his life in trouble, he says in Ps 27:3, ‘One thing have I asked of the LORD, that I will see after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.’ Or in Psalm 73:16-17, Asaph confesses his sins and particularly the longing of his heart for sin and for the success of the wicked, and says, “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.”

The description of Isaiah’s vision in the temple here in chapter 6 is the kind where words fail to do justice. Isaiah experienced, glory, burning angels (seraphim), an immense ‘shaking’ (a common description of the presence of God), smoke.

Sunday morning finds a mundane, if not tedious rhythm to it, week in and out, but this can only be because we forget, this vision of Isaiah’s, the call of God, the reality behind which and before we gather together and look to the east.

### The Posture of Humility

So, God calls us into His presence, the place of humility.

Isaiah's response to all this is to cry out 'woe is me! For I am lost!'. This is also a common response to a confrontation with the Lord.

Imagine the scene? As Isaiah is overwhelmed with the experience of his vision. He cries out, He calls to the ground?

If you were here, recall a few weeks ago, you were asked, would you kneel or bow for British royalty? Probably not, right?

I remember when I was a boy, our church added kneelers, as a way to increase the ability of the congregation to include their bodies in their worship. In the debate beforehand, one gentleman opposed, said, 'I don't kneel for anybody.' That is the cry of my heart most of the time.

Posture reveals a great deal about you and what you believe. Tim sitting up here, says he's really old! Watching college football, one of the standard camera shots we come to expect are those that juxtapose the jubilant fans jumping up and down on their feet with those in their seats with the heads in their hands. Which ones are happy? Which ones are sad?

Have you every been confronted with an act of great power or even a large, unexpected noise? What do you do? When a mortar round lands near or ordnance goes off, the instinct is to duck, the bigger the bang, the lower you go! The response is instantaneous and unbidden.

The curtain is drawn back and Isaiah sees the thrown room of God and is undone. He didn't have to decide to kneel, it was compulsion.

God is inscrutable, other, dangerous.

The priests who were to serve in the presence of God were instructed to tie bells on the hems of their robes so that the worshippers would know they were still alive as their served. The presence of God demands humility.

Remember Jesus's parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray in Luke 18. Remember the posture of the tax collector who went to the temple to pray, 'standing a far off' would not even look up but beating his breast confessed his sins'

Muslim prayer – 5 times a day, face Mecca, and bow

Why should be not always pray like that? Is our God not this God? Do we not deserve death?

Angel brings a burning coal to touch Isaiah's lips. The coal represents atonement for sin, the antidote for Isaiah's condition. It is important that neither the angels nor the LORD from His throne tell Isaiah, 'no, no, Isaiah. You are not as bad as you think. Everything will be alright.' Isaiah's response to the glory of the LORD is an accurate assessment and for him to remain in that space alive demands an intervention, one the LORD provides.

Isaiah said that he was a man of unclean lips and so the angel touches the fire to his lips, but just as easily his mind, heart or hands.

This story has impressed me in many ways but not the least of which is this, when scripture says that the LORD separates our sins from us as far as the heavens from the earth, as we heard in our Assurance of Parton from Ps 103, this is not just a description of distance, but also one of degree. We see the

difference here between the heavens and the earth. One cannot see the other without the LORD making it so. And yet He does. This God has taken our sins away. O the bliss of the glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole...

Parable of the wedding feast – Jesus calls, invites and even provides the wedding garments to those in need

### The Purpose of Humility

The posture of humility and the LORD's care and provision for us in our sinfulness and our weakness is the impression left by the advent season.

Welcome, all wonders in one sight! Eternity shut in a span.

Summer in winter. Day in night.

Heaven in earth, and God in man!

Great little one! Whose all-embracing birth

Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.

--"In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord" Richard Crashaw, 1648, 1652

From the very beginning, we have all needed a Savior. And the same glorious God, who called Isaiah into His presence for a moment, came down to lift us up. He provided the sacrifice, the coal from the altar, and has returned to His throne to wait until that time when He will complete the work.

Isaiah sees a vision, is undone, instead of being immediately consumed, and has his sins forgiven. Only AFTER all this, Isaiah is left in the room to hear the LORD ask the question, 'who will go for us?' The order here is important. It is a quite different story if Isaiah walked into the throne room of God and said, 'Yo! Help me help you.' God does not call His people to do great things and thus receive their atonement. He calls us, knowing full well our need, provides the sacrifice and then endows the rescued with purpose.

See there, the order of the Christian service. God calls His people to come to Him, invites them into His presence. We respond in worship, confessing our sins recognizing our unworthiness and He stoops down, lifting us up, assures us of His pardon and grace and then pours into us His love, encouragement and hope for the coming week.

The President of the United States has the power to pardon criminals. Pardon of course implies that the individual has been found guilty. Whoever the president is, there is often some political angle or statement being made, but imagine... the President of the United States pardons someone every knows *is* guilty AND THEN appoints them as the Ambassador to the European Union? Or makes them the Secretary of State?

Isaiah is brought into a place he has no right to be, and he knows it. Instead of being destroyed, his guilt is taken away AND THEN, he isn't immediately shuffled off into a comfortable retirement, he is allowed a role in the plan that God has in place, a plan to work out His salvation for the good of the nations.

The prophecy of judgment for God's people that concludes our passage this morning is difficult to read, and yet in the end, even it includes the goodness of God. Judgment is necessary because the people no longer serve God's mission of bringing His light to the nations. But from that judgment, the stump of the fallen tree, new growth may spring.

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Advent is the celebration and the commemoration of the Lord's comings, His first as a baby and His second as the coming King. That is why, the song, 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' fits both the people of Israel longing for the messiah and we today for His return.

"O Come, thou Key of David come,  
and open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
and close the path to misery."

Amazon Prime (and many other things to be sure) has shaped each one of us to refuse to wait. Three days to have something arrive at my porch?!? Catastrophe!

That word, what does it mean?

"a momentous tragic event ranging from extreme misfortune to utter overthrow or ruin or a violent and sudden change in a feature of the earth."

Tolkein called the coming of the Lord the 'eu-catastrophe' –

"eu" 'euthanasia' 'euphoria' 'euangelion'

The one from whom angels must shield their faces and their feet, the Creator of the universe came down to earth as a baby, crying, pooping, peeing, in desperate need of food, care and comfort.

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,

And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,

Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high Council-Table,

To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,

He laid aside; and here with us to be,

Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day,

And chose with us a darksome House of mortal Clay.

--John Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"

He came some 2000 years ago, to live and die, He upended earth and heaven and then returned. The earth shook, the blind saw, the lame were healed, the dead rose, sinners forgiven. So also, will the second coming of the LORD be a catastrophe, a eu-catastrophe.

Isaiah was being sent out with a very difficult message and the LORD revealed something to him to enable and equip the prophet for the work. Imagine for the rest of his life, what Isaiah saw, thought and

felt as he entered the temple, every single time as he looked to the front of the sanctuary and his mind recreated the vision he had received. Fire, shaking, angels flying covering themselves, smoke, an approaching angel, a burning coal, atonement, the divine voice and his call.

We have not seen the LORD that way, let me know if you have!, unlike the disciples, we have not seen the resurrected LORD. These events have been recorded for us, however, for the same reason. Re-create in your mind, as you are able, the scene. Each subsequent generation is told, each Sunday morning... who our God is and what God has done for His people. A reminder that we are His people, in His place for His purpose.

O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home;

It is the first of the year anno domini 2023, a date that no one treats with indifference. Why is that? Ecclesiastes says that God has set eternity on our hearts. We know to mark the passage of time.

And so, this next year, each week, to realize what it is that we do every Sunday morning, who it is we come to worship, what He is like, what He has done for us, why He has called us here and to what purpose He sends us out into the world each week? To reveal to those around us this God, light inaccessible, invites His people, sinners in need of a Savior, into His presence, provides atonement to restore us to our glory and our purpose to go out as His messengers and ministers in this place.

Next week, picture in mind the one who sits on the throne, the angels who sing His praises, and who says, 'I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.'

Isaiah 43:25