**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“A Man of Unclean Lips in the Midst of a People of Unclean Lips”**

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“*And I said: ‘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*’” (Isaiah 6:5).

After his father was assassinated, Uzziah was crowned king over the southern kingdom of Judah. He was 16 years old. He reigned for the next 52 years, and it was a good 52 years. He was smart, capable, and faithful. 2 Kings says, “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (15). Rare praise for the kings! Uzziah also did what was right in the eyes of the people. He modernized the military and beat back Judah’s enemies (2 Ki. 14:22; 2 Ch. 26:1-7). He rebuilt and fortified the walls of Jerusalem. He built towers in the wilderness (2 Chron. 26:9), protecting rural lands from raids or incursions. Uzziah also expanded Judah’s agricultural base, turning arid, infertile land into verdant, productive land.

2 Chronicles 26 says “God made him prosper” (v. 5). “He was marvelously helped, till he was strong” (v. 14). Though he lived 2700 years ago, you can learn more about Uzziah in 2 Chronicles and in 2 Kings, or, if you prefer, in various archeological periodicals because the Bible is about real people who lived real lives in real places and left behind real evidence.

For 52 years, the people of Judah could rely on Uzziah to make good decisions. But now, Uzziah has died. Surely the news came as a shock; it was hard to believe, widespread grief, profound sense of loss. And what of the future? Who knows whether the next king will be a wise man or a fool, whether he’ll be faithful to the Lord or a treacherous apostate?

In our text, Isaiah is given a vision. Verse 1, “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple.” That is, “when King Uzziah died, I saw the real King,” the King of kings, the Lord of lords sitting on His throne, His robes flowing down into a roofless temple.

Notice, Isaiah can look no higher on this King than the train of the King’s robe. After all, for a sinner to look into the face of holiness is to die. No man can see God and live (Ex. 33:20). It’s like Exodus 24 when Moses and his companions were in God’s presence, but they cannot manage to describe anything but the pavement under His feet, made of sapphire, clear as crystal. Even the seraphim, angelic creatures, literally “fiery beings” with six wings, even they cover their faces and feet in deep reverence.

In contrast, think about how so many Americans want their worship. We want it light and entertaining and funny. Sometimes, to be market friendly, the Christian church forgets its subject is God. We think it’s about us. We forget in the Bible the first human response to the presence of God, or even one of His angels, is fear, awe, terror. We blithely invoke God’s name, not having the foggiest idea of the power and holiness of the One whose name we are calling. We assume He is safe and harmless. We assume He is always on our side. We stuff words into His mouth, saying God told me this, or instructed me to do that. Worst of all, instead of being created in His image, we make Him into our own image, changing His timeless truths to align with our ever-shifting values on abortion, euthanasia, gender identity, or gay marriage. We’ve lost our sense of fear and reverence before the Lord and His Word.

But even the seraphim, holy creatures themselves, cover their faces and their feet in reverence. They are not so brazen; they must know things we do not.

The seraphim are calling one to another, and at the sound of their voices the earth shakes, down to the bedrock of the Temple Mount. The seraphim sing in the temple as we sing in the liturgy: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory!” He is thrice holy, for emphasis, but also because He is One God, three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Isaiah has seen what he ought not have seen. He has seen the King of kings, even if it’s just the hem of His robe. So, he cries out, “Woe is me! I’m finished. I’m done for. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”

Why do you think Isaiah focuses on his lips? Why isn’t he worried about his adulterous eyes, for instance, or his unclean thoughts?

First, Isaiah is in the temple, where worship happens. Speech is a central part of liturgy and worship. Unclean lips present a high hurdle to pure worship. Jesus said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me” (Mt. 15:8). If you’ve ever found yourself just mouthing the Lord’s prayer, you know what He’s saying.

Second, Isaiah was a prophet, a mouthpiece of God. Speaking is a central part of his calling, and he feels a profound sense of unworthiness because of his unclean lips.

Third, in the Bible, what a person says with his unclean lips reflects the state of his unclean heart. From our mouths, we spew the contents of our hearts. In Matthew 12, Jesus said, “How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak” (vv. 34-36).

Fourth, emphasizing unclean lips highlights the power of speech. The Holocaust, for example, began with words. The words came first. Then the hatred. Then the camps.

But it’s not just the one with unclean lips. The one who ***listens*** also has a responsibility. Proverbs 31, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (31:8). That is, we can just as easily malign our neighbor’s reputation *with our silence*. If you are not willing to defend your neighbor’s reputation, then do not listen to the one who is slandering! Proverbs 17, “A wicked person listens to deceitful lips; a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue” (v. 4).

We wish we did better. We wish we could go back and scrub up the record. But we cannot. We can and should apologize . . . and also forgive. We can and should beg the Lord to have mercy for every careless word we say. And the Good News: the Lord does have mercy.

Verse 6, “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.” With the blazing ember, the seraph touches Isaiah’s mouth and says, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” It is the unclean lips over which Isaiah was despairing. It is the unclean lips that are cleansed by fire, cauterized, to stop the bleeding and prevent infection. It also makes me think of the tongues of fire at Pentecost and the Spirit’s work of purifying and sanctifying us.

Notice also the coal came from the altar within the temple. That’s where lambs were sacrificed and burned, as a substitute for the death of the sinner. This coal may have been a charred portion of the whole burnt offering. “With that” Luther says, “our sacraments are established.” That is, we have the visible means of grace: coal. And we have the Word of forgiveness: “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

The same thing is going on right here. We have the visible means of grace instituted by Jesus: the bread and the wine. And we have the Word, “Take eat, this is my body and my blood for you, for the forgiveness of sins.” Whose body? The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lamb whose one death made all those little sacrifices before Him efficacious.

In the text, the seraph touched Isaiah’s lips with the live coal of a burnt offering. Here, the body and blood of the Lamb touches your lips. “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

If a live coal touched your lips, it would burn. It would hurt! Why doesn’t Isaiah scream? Someone else must have done the suffering. Jesus Himself bore the pains of the cross that bring us forgiveness from this altar. Because He loves us, He died for us. Because He gives His innocence to us, we are clean and forgiven and ready to serve.

Which brings us to the last verse. Finally, the Lord speaks. Not Isaiah. Not the seraphim. It’s the King of kings. And He says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” (Notice the “Us,” referring again to God’s triune nature.) Of all people, God is calling the one who knows he has unclean lips, for there’s probably nothing worse before God than a self-righteous prophet or preacher. Isaiah knows his lips are unclean. But he also knows his lips have been cauterized by a live coal. Isaiah has also heard God’s call to represent the King to the people.

Having been forgiven by God, Isaiah is no longer fearful. He’s no longer despairing. He is bold. He is eager. And he is ready. “Here am I,” he says. “Send me.”