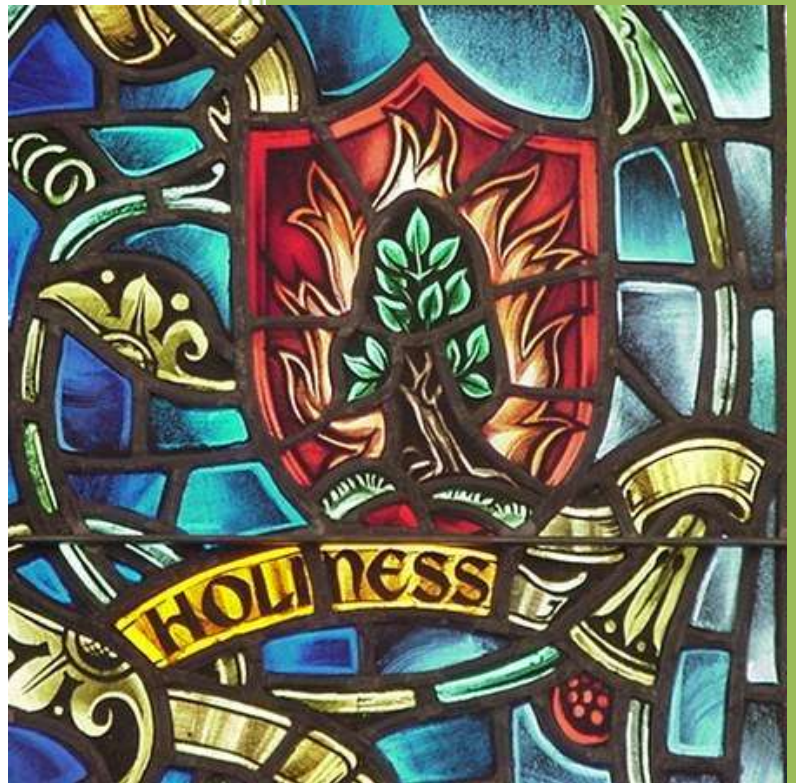


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HOLINESS: A Holy God Making a Holy People for Holy Living



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Isaiah 6:1-9a; 1 Peter 1:13-15; 2:1-3; 9-10

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As we look at the stained glass window, the theme of “Holiness” fits well with what has gone before:

- Creation, Redemption, Truth, and Judgment: all themes that feed into and out of Holiness – depicted as the “burning bush”
- How appropriate also for the timing of this theme of Holiness during the church’s observance of “Holy Week”

As I reflected on this theme, I realize I am one least qualified to speak on the subject but -- as is my custom – I will. I could not help but remember how some in the Christian tradition have embraced notions of Holiness that required one to shed or Identify items or pursuits deemed inappropriate for holiness. For example:

- Wearing a neck tie
- Adorning jewelry [Wedding ring]
- Consuming pork
- Pursuing Higher Education [Academic degrees]
- Drinking coffee
- For women, wearing shorts of any kind or footwear revealing the toes
- For women, not suffering faithfully any spousal abuse for the cause of Christ
- Attending movie theaters or watching Television
- Playing, listening, or dancing to secular or “non-religious” music
- Observing or celebrating any holiday deemed of pagan origin--like Christmas or Easter

Furthermore, sometimes holiness was and is frequently equated with possession of Items deemed as a “sign” that one is truly holy:

- Faithful purchases of religious products from Christian Bookstores: Holy water from the Jordan River – slick marketing from the Jordan River at a bargain price; a glossy rock inscribed with scripture; or scriptural mints for bad breath, etc.
- Display of bumper stickers substituting for rigorous moral analysis: “honk, if you love Jesus”; “Do you follow Jesus this close?”; “Real Men Love Jesus”; “Adam & Eve, Not Adam and Steve”; “Know Jesus, Know Peace”; etc.
- The American flag+ Bible + gestures of nationalism or an American flag pendant put on the left lapel—signifying that one really gets it

Biblically and theologically, however, the basic meaning of “holiness” and its cognates qadosh or hagios or roots focuses on “separation,” “wholeness”—“to be set apart.” Holiness is fundamentally “a relational or social” term that highlights separation from all that is “worldly;” that is any philosophy, practice, or thought, or way of life that undermine and contradict the

will and purposes of God. In short hand, holiness is the love of God and the love of the neighbor as one loves oneself, and the love of other parts of God’s creation.

Yet, separation for sake of separation is alien to the biblical notion of holiness. I must admit that there is some appeal to the notion that a changed life should involve a changed lifestyle. Yet, we commit biblical

fraud to identify the Christian life only with a checklist of Do's and Don'ts, or the holy cry from the periphery, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate!"

However, the Scriptures of the Church—from Genesis to Revelation—remind us of a much deeper truth we should embrace: *All understandings of Holiness, or what it means to be holy and to live a holy life, must have God and God's agenda as the undeniable standard. Human-made standards do not and cannot ever serve this purpose perfectly. How many of us, or persons in the world today, have been maligned or screwed up by religious practices and understandings that took away "liberty" in Christ, saddled us with moral, unbiblical, or extra biblical moral demands we could not maintain with a clear conscience, and/or hindered our capacity to think critically in the context of a vital faith and piety?*

The God who creates out of love is a holy God; the God who calls God's creation into divine relationship is a holy God; the God who judges our sin, but initiates redemption is a holy God; the God who calls Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into covenant and lavishes them and their descendants with promises is a holy God; the God of Hagar and Ishmael is a holy God; the God of the Exodus, the God of the burning bush, the God of the wilderness wanderings, and the God of the Promised Land, is a holy God.

The God of the prophets of Israel is a holy God. To say that Yahweh is a holy God is to identify as integral to God's agenda the condemnation of the nations, even of Israel and Judah, for how they treated the poor, the widows, the orphans, aliens, and anyone else whose lives were lived on the ragged edge: Micah prophesied that the Lord will punish the land barons, the judges, and the religious leaders. Amos prophesied about the people's perversion of morality --how Yahweh's sympathies lie with the poor who were cheated and exploited by the rich and the powerful; how he denounced the upper classes' luxurious living based on an unjust exploitation of the poor; emphasizing how true worship cannot be separated from God's justice and God's righteousness; and how they had rejected the responsibility that comes with privilege.

Huldah, the prophetess, affirmed the authenticity of the Law and contributed to the spiritual renewal under King Josiah. Hosea also prophesied against oppression and exploitation of the poor, especially through the perversion of the court system by the wealthy and the powerful; he also identified Israel's infidelity to the covenant—i.e., its religious apostasy and broad-based immorality.

As we think further on the holiness of God, what more poignant passage can we identify of the holiness of God than to turn to Isaiah's call narrative in Isaiah 6:1-9a.

Just as Isaiah "saw the Lord," we also must "see the Lord" this morning. The God he saw is the same God we must see if we are to leave here charged, changed, and challenged. What God *did* Isaiah the prophet see? *HE SAW...*

1. A Vision of a God who sits unequaled on a throne (1)

- *Exceedingly High and Lifted Up*
- *Having no rivals / His reputation unparalleled*
- *He is so full of Himself that just the "hem" of his flowing royal vestments is enough to fill every space of the temple: no place left for any speck of dirt to hide*
- *A perspective on our own times: Regardless how large our sanctuaries or church campuses are, there is no human construction big or awesome enough to contain all of God's holiness, righteousness, glory and presence*

2. A Vision of a God who is entirely holy and supremely glorious (3-4)

- *Even the Seraphs flew around with their three pair of wings, shouting: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” – that is, ceremoniously set apart and indescribably pure*
- *He is the Lord “Almighty” – unsurpassable in power to conquer everything that needs to be ultimately overcome and overwhelmingly defeated*
- *His glory fills and encircles the entire rim of the earth—A glory of blinding light, supreme honor, inexhaustible wealth, and unexcelled majesty*
- *Read 2 Chronicles 5 where the priests minister in the temple and are confronted by God’s holy presence: I wonder whether as a seminary community, as people also who worship, as pastors and preachers, we too come into the presence of a holy God--the very One about whom we read, preach, study and teach-- bringing even our intellects into subjection to the ultimate purposes of God?*

3. A Vision of a God who causes God’s creation to confess their unworthiness [even as they shake in God’s awesome presence] (5)

- *We can never see God as God really is, without seeing ourselves as we really are*
- *A true vision of an exalted, holy, glorious and mighty God makes us see who we really are*
- *One and All are “unclean” before the Holy One [Crying, “Woe is me! I am unclean!”]*
- *For we are made to see the King of all Kings and Lord of all Lords!*
- *Who is this King of Glory? Yahweh is the Lord Almighty!*

4. A Vision of a holy God who thoroughly cleanses the unclean (6-7)

- *I remember the times when I could only yearn to be cleansed—yearned for something better—yearned to be changed. I yearned for all my habits to be brought under subjection. All my best efforts could not do it. But there was the community of God who reminded me that there was a God who could transform and change our lives.*
- *God remedies and heals us of our sins and rebellions*
- *God takes away our guilt arising from our disobedience to God. It was a scene of transformation*
- *God forgives us, pardons us, empowers us and releases us -----"FINALLY";*

5. A Vision of a God who commissions us for ministry and sends us out to serve in God’s world (8-9a): [Who will Go? Send Me. Go, Show, and Tell....]

Isaiah’s vision of a Holy God has it right—“Holiness” begins with God. Our sense of what it means to be holy—while often commendable—pales in comparison to the holiness of God. For those, however, who feel we need not be concerned with being holy people of God just don’t get it, either. Railing against pietism, relativism, fundamentalism, postmodernism, liberalism, capitalism, and socialism and so forth, may prove popular and enlightening, but ultimately woefully unsatisfying. Why? Because God does call every believer to live holy—to love God and to love the neighbor – even when that neighbor is your enemy. This is a hard saying.

The final text read is 1 Peter 1:13-15. The text carries on the theme of Isaiah 6 and even Leviticus 11. This is a letter written to the chosen people of God, who are exiles, aliens, sojourners, or pilgrims. These are people who understand that the world they live in is not their home, but they are willing to live faithfully where they are until they continue to move forward with Jesus. They are willing—in the meantime-- to live among those who reside there. They become resident aliens -- but they are called pilgrims. God calls holy people today to live among the peoples of the world, but in such a way that our very living becomes a witness and embodied presence of what it means to be people who have been transformed by the power of the living and holy God. The audience of this text is people graced with a new birth and an inheritance, protected by faith through the power of God, and sustained by a love for God that evokes joy unspeakable and full of glory; thus we read: “Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as God who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” – vs. 14-16

- One focus of this text appropriately is our seminary context where we use our minds. This text keys in on minds—girded for action-- mentally prepared for action [mind = the seat of the heart: thinking through, meditating over, processing information into understanding, including making moral decisions – disciplined, self-controlled, clear-headed decisions]. Think about that.
- Second, this text is a call for decisive action to set our hope completely on the benefits and the good that comes through God’s grace [Grace = God’s kindness, love, and favor toward us]
- The text, moreover, also emphasizes the humble embrace of our status as God’s obedient creation – creations incapable of being and doing God’s kind of holiness, except as God’s calling, gift, and favor to us.
- In addition, the text admonishes us of the following: Do not conform outwardly to a pattern of evil desires alien to God’s purposes and divine agenda – For Christ-followers this pattern marks the former life caused by “ignorance” [i.e., when we did not have knowledge and refused even to accept guilt for our immoral behaviors]. The “Not” is a strong negative – if you *are* being conformed to the world—STOP! If you are *not* being conformed to the world—DON’T START! This part of scripture ends with this:
- “BUT [a strong conjunction] be holy in all you do”—in every area of life – “even as the God who called you is HOLY.” [See also 2:1-3, 9-17]
 - Holiness not just an individual or personal achievement. Diana LeClerc, in a Presidential address to the Wesleyan Theological Society in 2008, entitled “Holiness and Power,” recounted her and her husband’s joys and challenges with their twelve year old son, diagnosed with ADHD. She believed in holiness. She believed in the transformative power of God to entirely sanctify us. She believes, however, that our theologies of holiness often leave out some people—like her son. Though he was high functioning, he still found it difficult to be able to morally embrace what God required. He had a moral “dis-ability.” With the way we talk about perfection, we often do not understand the ways that the requirements of moral perfection might leave out some people. What do you do with someone with ADHD, with Down’s syndrome, those whose bodies are contorted with disease, and those with Alzheimer’s? Holiness is not just an individual achievement. We all have some form of brokenness. We all have issues. Yet, while personal piety is important, God’s community—the body of Christ-- is also called to be holy. The community embraces those who often are labeled as non-functioning or unproductive or abnormal or broken. What kind of community do we need to be in order to reflect the holiness of God in a broken world? We are called not just to be a holy person, but more fundamentally to be -- as the body of Christ -- a holy people.

- Holiness is God's gift to God's people – the body of Christ. As we follow Jesus, Jesus calls a people--
 - A chosen people
 - A royal priesthood
 - A holy nation
 - God's own [special] people [2:9]

As we follow Jesus this week, along the Via Dolorosa, to Golgotha's hill, we see our savior clothed in despair, on a Cross where power is cloaked as weakness, where victory masquerades as defeat; we learn that we all are still in process and often broken in one way or another.

However, the good news is that a holy God—embodied in the crucified and resurrected Jesus-- creates and makes a holy people, so that they may live holy lives. May the grace and power of a holy God continue to transform us, you, and me – with our permission. Amen.