**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 6, 2022**

**Text—Isaiah 6:1-13**

In last week’s sermon, we heard about God’s calling of the prophet Jeremiah. If you recall, Jeremiah did not feel competent to be a prophet of the Lord; he thought that he was too young and couldn’t speak well enough to accomplish the task. God, however, told Jeremiah that he would be with him and give him the words to say, and that he would make Jeremiah a fortified city and an iron pillar to resist the attacks of hostile hearers. Because of God’s presence and empowerment, Jeremiah was able to accomplish the tasks he was given, and his enemies were not able to overcome him in the end. Thus, we learned last week that God makes his people strong when they feel they are weak; he makes them capable when they feel incompetent. We Christians are able to share God’s Word with others effectively because of what God, working through his Holy Spirit, does to make our hearts and minds ready to accomplish his mission.

In today’s Old Testament text, we hear the story of God’s calling of another prophet, one who ended up making just as much of an impact on the people of God as Jeremiah did: the prophet Isaiah. And like Jeremiah, Isaiah also had some significant doubts about his ability to proclaim the Word of God to the people of Israel and Judah. However, the nature of his doubts was fundamentally different from those of Jeremiah, as we will soon see.

The account of Isaiah’s calling is probably much more familiar to us than that of Jeremiah. Most of us have probably heard this story before, and pretty much all of us have sung a portion of this text in our Divine Service liturgy almost every week. The story begins in the 8th century BC, right around the year that King Uzziah of Judah died. At this point, both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were still free nations, although that was soon to change. Within the next couple of decades, the Assyrian Empire would send an army to destroy Israel and almost destroy Judah as well. As always, this was going to happen because God’s people had forsaken him and begun worshiping idols, adopting the detestable religious practices of their pagan neighbors. God was punishing his people with these foreign invaders, and unless they repented, they wouldn’t stand a chance against them. So God sent prophets to his people, urging them to change their ways and avoid the disaster that was soon to strike. And one of the prophets God chose was Isaiah.

On the day God called Isaiah, he started off by sending him a vision of heaven. Isaiah saw the Lord himself, high and lifted up, sitting on his lofty throne, with the train of his robe filling the temple. Around the Lord flew the seraphim, the six-winged angels of heaven, and they cried out to each other: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the temple shook like an earthquake, and the temple was filled with smoke. In short, it was a powerful display of the glory of God, one that would have been almost too much for a mere mortal like Isaiah to behold. And it basically was too much for Isaiah, because the sight of it all filled him with terror. He exclaimed, “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; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Isaiah thought that he was in big trouble. He knew that he was a sinful man, and that the nation he lived in was full of sinners, and now here he was, beholding the glory of the Lord. He probably thought that he would be burned to a crisp, that God’s power and glory would consume him utterly. That had certainly happened to other sinners who had beheld God in the past, so why shouldn’t it happen to Isaiah now?

So the problem Isaiah had when God called him was fundamentally different from the one Jeremiah had initially. Whereas Jeremiah felt like he lacked the *skills* to preach the Word of God effectively, Isaiah believed that he lacked the *righteousness* to do so. He was a sinner living among many other sinners, and none of them had lived up to God’s expectations for them. Not only had the nation as a whole forsaken the Lord their God and worshiped idols, but even the faithful among them were not perfect either. They too had broken the Ten Commandments; they too had given in to anger, lust, covetousness, and all kinds of other sins. They may have worshiped the true God, but they did not obey his Law as well as they should. God demanded perfection from his people, and none of them, not even the faithful ones, had come close to attaining that. Isaiah recognized this to be true, and so he knew that he was utterly unworthy to stand before God. Not only that, he also knew that he was utterly unworthy to preach the Word of God to the people. How could he, as a sinner himself, call others to repentance without being a hypocrite? He would not be preaching from a position of righteousness; he would be preaching as a sinner, someone who had sinned against God just as much as his hearers had. This alone made him unqualified to be one of God’s prophets. So, even if he did survive this encounter with God, there was no way that God would actually choose to send him to do anything.

But then, after Isaiah exclaimed that he was doomed because he was a man of unclean lips, one of the angels flew toward him. In his hand the angel held a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. The angel had the purifying fire of God in his hand, and he was flying straight for Isaiah. Isaiah must have thought that this was it; this was the moment that God would burn him up. Once the coal touched him, he would burst into flame, and that would be the end for him. But something unexpected happened. The angel reached out with the coal and touched Isaiah’s lips with it, the same lips that Isaiah had just said were so unclean. But the coal did not burn his lips. Rather, as he touched Isaiah’s mouth with it, the angel proclaimed, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” Instead of being punished, Isaiah was being forgiven. Instead of being consumed, Isaiah was given new life. Even though Isaiah was indeed a sinner, God would not destroy him as his sins deserved, but he would rather pardon his sin and take away his guilt. God forgives the sins of those who repent, and because Isaiah recognized his sin and admitted it before God, God forgave him too. Now Isaiah could stand before God with a clean conscience; his lips had been cleansed of their sin, and he had been freed to use them to speak the Word of God to the people. No, Isaiah was not perfect, and yes, he was still a sinner. But God had taken away his sin and made him perfectly righteous in his eyes, so that he was no longer too much of a sinner to proclaim the Word. He would call the people to repentance and preach grace to those who believed his message, and so he would fulfill the calling God had for him. So when the voice of the Lord rang out, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?,” Isaiah boldly replied, “Here am I! Send me.” He was ready to go out and preach the Word, even though he was unworthy, because he knew that the Lord had made him worthy.

As with the story of Jeremiah’s calling last week, this story of Isaiah’s calling has some significant applications for how we Christians today should approach the task God has given us of proclaiming the name of Jesus to the world. We heard last week about how God makes his people competent and strong when they feel unqualified and weak; now we learn how God makes us sinners into righteous people. As was Isaiah, so too are we sinners who cannot expect to be regarded as worthy to be God’s mouthpieces to unbelievers. How could we be? How can we go around telling people what God wants them to do if we ourselves are sinners too? How can we be so hypocritical as to call sinners to repentance when we also do things that are against God’s will? It’s kind of like the parents who see their kids getting into trouble, but don’t feel like they can say anything because they themselves made the same mistakes when they were younger. How are they worthy to tell their kids what to do? Similarly, how can we Christians presume to judge other people and tell them that they will be lost if they do not repent and believe in Jesus? It might seem like the height of hypocrisy to us.

But there is nothing hypocritical at all about wanting other people to experience the same grace and forgiveness of God that you have received. Yes, you are a sinner, but you are a forgiven sinner, and you have eternal life with God to look forward to. This is not because of anything that you yourself have done; rather, it is because of what God has done for you through his Son Jesus. Like he did for Isaiah, Jesus has cleansed you from sin and atoned for it, but not by touching a coal to your lips. Rather, he atoned for your sin by shedding his blood on the cross, thus serving as a perfect sacrifice and taking your place under the wrath of God. Now you have been forgiven for your sins, and you are no longer unworthy to stand in the presence of God and proclaim his name to the world. He has made you worthy, and thus you can boldly and confidently tell others about the riches of the grace that you have received in Jesus. It doesn’t matter what sins you may have struggled with in the past, or even what sins you’re struggling with now. What matters is that Jesus has taken away your guilt, and you are now freed to share that same blessing with others by proclaiming the Gospel to them. You should not keep silent and avoid telling others about Jesus because of your sinfulness or unworthiness; everyone else in the church is just as sinful and unworthy as you are! I’m a sinful man, and yet God has chosen me to stand in this pulpit and preach the Gospel to this congregation. Likewise, he has chosen all of you to proclaim Jesus in whatever situations you find yourselves. You have a wonderful opportunity to help others find the same grace and forgiveness from God that you have received. Take advantage of that opportunity, and by so doing you will bring others to know Jesus and help them to be cleansed of their sins as well.

When God first called Isaiah, Isaiah was terrified. He thought that God had come to destroy him because of his sins, and that the fire of the coal from the altar would utterly consume him. But when he found out that God was actually forgiving his sins, it completely changed his attitude. He went from being craven and fearful to being joyful and bold, so much so that when God asked whom he would send to preach to his people, Isaiah immediately jumped up and volunteered, “Here am I! Send me.” In the same way, God has visited all of us sinners and taken away our fear by forgiving our sins, which gives us bold and joyful hearts that are eager to share those blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation with the rest of the world. We too can jump up and volunteer for service in the name of Jesus, telling God, “Here am I! Send me.” My prayer is that all of us here today would show such enthusiasm for God’s mission, that we would want God to send us out into the world to proclaim his name to all who would listen. And the great thing is that he’s already done that! All of us Christians are now missionaries for Jesus, people who have been sent out into our various vocations to tell others about him. In our families, schools, workplaces, and social groups we have countless opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus with people who do not know him. We have been sent and placed into these situations for that very purpose. May all of us, then, rejoice in the forgiveness of sins we have received from God, and like Isaiah, channel that forgiveness into an eagerness to serve the kingdom and proclaim the name of Jesus to the world. Amen.