

# Wholly Other

Isaiah 6:1-8

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First Central Congregational UCC  
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What is holy?  
What is sacred?  
What do these terms mean to you?

Last autumn I was in conversation with Rev. Frank Rivas of the First Unitarian Church and Rabbi Josh Brown of Temple Israel. We were discussing the idea of hosting a series of interfaith dialogues. We are still having this conversation, as we have yet been unable to get all three calendars to align. But during the planning last fall, Frank raised the question, "When we call each life holy, what do we mean by that?"

As I pondered that question, I realized that holiness is not something I've ever preached about. It's a word that appears in our hymns and liturgies, but we don't talk much about it.

When the staff gathered to plan worship for Lent, I mentioned Frank's question and asked if they thought we could build a Lenten season around exploring holiness. As we discussed the topic, we quickly admitted that the concept is often associated with negative things like purity, pietism, exclusion, and self-righteousness. It can be a very moralistic term. You know, the person who is "holier than thou."

But we also use the term to describe good things. There is holy ground--places that are special to us. It was this idea which inspired our Sanctuary Decorating Team to use cairns as a visual representation of our Lenten theme. Cairns are trail markers and landmarks used around the globe in multiple cultures. They can have simple meanings marking the path through a barren landscape or rich symbolic meanings. In recent years I've encountered them most on rocky beaches where tourists build their own, memorializing their presence in a spot of beauty.

We also use the idea of holiness to describe all life is sacred. This sacramental theology teaches that the grace of God is poured out on all things, and that in all things we can experience God.

We soon realized that there is plenty of material to occupy us for the season of Lent. Lent is this season that precedes Easter. It is usually a time of self-examination and personal growth, often through repentance or practicing spiritual disciplines. Exploring the holy and what it means to be holy, is an appropriate Lenten theme.

And, so, we begin with the holiness of God and this magisterial passage found in Isaiah 6 where the prophet has his vision of the throne room of God and the attending seraphim hovering about with their six wings singing the hymn "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." You'll notice that today's Offertory is a setting of this hymn, the *Sanctus* by the composer Faure. Each of the Sundays in Lent, the choir will sing a different

setting of the *Sanctus*.

In describing this vision, the great scholar of the prophets, Walter Brueggemann, writes “We are here at the core of holiness from which is decreed all that happens everywhere in creation.” Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, wrote, “If a man does not feel what the numinous is, when he reads the sixth chapter of Isaiah, then no ‘preaching, singing, telling’ . . . can avail him.”

This passage, then, is the starting point for understanding holiness within our biblical tradition. So, what’s happening?

My professor on the prophets, Dr. Kevin Hall, told us to imagine that we are the young Isaiah, a member of a prominent Jerusalem family, and we are in the Temple, maybe even for the funeral of King Uzziah. The incense is burning, and its smoke fills the space. The priests and the choirs are chanting. All around us the congregation is caught up in the ritual. When suddenly, we have a vision. We imagine that the room we are in is the throne room of God in heaven. We catch glimpses of God on the throne as the seraphim fly about singing.

If we were Isaiah, we might lose ourselves in that moment. The awe and the wonder could overtake us.

Have you ever experienced that emotion? A feeling of the sublime, of ecstasy. Of being caught up in a larger reality. I know I have.

There was the night my father died, when I felt the love and compassion of God flooding my very body.

There was the time I was in Rome attending worship at the Vatican, and as I took communion, I had something akin to a mystical experience.

It has occurred while I was sitting quietly and meditating. While I was in Yosemite National Park lying on a pebbly beach beside a calm lake looking up at the towering granite cliffs above me. Or walking among the Giant Sequoias. I experienced it last year when Michael and I watched the rising smoke and fiery glow of the lava pool in the crater of Halema’uma’u on the island of Hawaii.

I’ve also felt that sense of awe and wonder sitting in a hospital room watching someone die. Or in the moment when a baby was born and then holding them in my arms for the first time.

How about you? Where and how do you experience the holy, the awe-inspiring, the ecstatic?

Rudolf Otto was a German scholar writing a century ago. His major book is *The Idea of the Holy*. The subtitle of the book is “An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational.” I finally read this book in preparation for this series. I tried reading it once before and didn’t get through it. It is very dry reading. You see, we ministers must make these sorts of sacrifices. We read these dense and dry books so you don’t have to!

Otto might not be that fun to read, but his ideas are basic to understanding this concept of holiness. He claimed that there is a basic, non-rational part of the human psyche which is drawn to these moments of awe. We are wired to experience wonder and mystery. He called it the “mysterium tremendum.” It’s a feeling of dependence, of being a creature, of not being

in control. This is the idea of the holy, before it ever gets associated with any form of moralism or purification.

In primitive humans it is often associated with dread and fear at unexplained natural phenomena. It loses some of that anxiety as we advance as a species, but it never really disappears.

Did any of you watch the recent remake of the science television series *Cosmos*? This recent series was hosted by Neil Degraesse Tyson. I was fascinated by it, on many levels. One thing that was particularly fascinating to me was how religious it was. And by religious I mean this idea of a feeling of dependence in the wake of something grand and overwhelming, for Tyson is an avowed atheist. The series repeatedly attempted to inspire the viewers' awe at the grandeur and wonder of the universe. It both inspired and humbled at the same time, reminding us that we are but a small thing within the vast stretches of space and time. But a small thing with a mind that allows us to explore.

The idea of the holy was often conveyed with visuals—with incredible pictures and animations from the farthest reaches of space to the tiny depths of the sub-atomic realm. My favorite image from the entire series was watching an animation that predicted what will transpire eons from now when our galaxy collides with its closest neighbor, sending millions of stars into a dazzling cosmic dance.

On the whole, the series suggested that science trains us to experience the beauty of the world with awe and rapture. Yet, that's a form of religion, as understood by Rudolf Otto who describes "the feeling of personal nothingness and submergence before the awe-inspiring."

Let's return to Isaiah 6. Walter Brueggemann, the great scholar of the prophets, writes that Isaiah, here in the presence of God's holiness "has a fresh sense of himself, his inadequacy, his lack of qualification to be in the holy presence." He goes on "There is no coziness here, for God's presence is a source of deep jeopardy."

This is a common theme in those who discuss the holiness of God. God is wholly other, complete separate and distinct from humanity and creation. The holy God is viewed as possibly dangerous, inspiring something akin to the dread and fear that Otto discovered in primitive religious responses.

Timothy Bradshaw, an Oxford don who has written a quite wonderful book on the Lord's Prayer, explores the holiness of God when he explores the phrase "hallowed be thy name." The word "hallowed" is another form of "holy."

Bradshaw writes that the "quality of holiness is that God is not common, [not] to be taken for granted, [as] part of the furniture of life and somehow manipulable." He adds that God is not something that "we can learn to 'work.'"

But he also points out that in the Lord's Prayer the emphasis on God's holiness follows the naming of God as Father. One image is intimate and loving, while the other is more remote and separating. There is an intentional paradox at the opening of the prayer.

And for him, the image of God's holiness should not inspire fear, dread, or anxiety. Bradshaw turns to Isaiah 6 to make his point. He notices that Isaiah, experiencing his vision of the divine presence, "is not left in a state of frozen terror." Yes, Isaiah is filled with awe. Yes, Isaiah repents of his sin and is purified. But it is an energizing and transforming experience.

This is the story of Isaiah's call to be a prophet, sent on a mission by God to share God's message with the people. Bradshaw writes, "This is the renewal of the creature, not its paralysis."

He continues that Isaiah emerges from the experience as "God's co-operative worker, not as a disgusting vermin full of self-hate." When I read that I remembered something that Nikki Zimmerman has said often during discussions in First Forum. In her strict Lutheran upbringing there was an emphasis upon sinful humanity as being like worms in comparison with God. According to Bradshaw, that sort of belittling theology is contrary to God's holiness as revealed in the Book of Isaiah.

He writes, "Biblical spirituality always upholds creation . . . Humans have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but God, in [God's] holiness, desires not the death of a sinner but repentance and purposive life."

The rituals and themes of Ash Wednesday and Lent can put us off because of their focus on confessing sin, repenting, and seeking forgiveness. But when observed well these traditions are not to belittle us and make us feel like worms. They are, instead, to call us to renewal and transformation, to become our best selves.

This is the grace of God, reaching out to us and calling us into new and deeper relationship. A grace that loves us just the way we are, while also wanting the very best for us.

It is this holy and amazing grace which reaches out to Isaiah in the moment that he feels lost. Holy and amazing grace which brings him healing, forgiveness, and salvation. Holy and amazing grace which sends him forth on a new mission, empowered and renewed.

This Lent as we encounter the Holy God, may we too respond as Isaiah did, "Here am I; send me!"