

“High Hopes: The Holy Seed” | Isaiah 6:1-13
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Preaching Draft | November 30, 2025
(Discussion questions on page 10)

Many people throughout history have reported having powerful supernatural encounters with God. Many of us in this room have had such experiences. Through churches, Bible studies, retreats, in nature. Through music, worship, the sacraments. Many of us would with great conviction testify that we have encountered God and that this experience has radically changed our lives.

But have you ever wondered: how can you tell if you’ve *truly* encountered God. The *living* God. The real and eternal God, and not just some figment of an overly active religious imagination.

Whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, it’s an important question to ask. In a world full of realistic AI fake-outs and endless news fact checking, it’s becoming increasingly harder to know what is real in everyday, earthly things, never mind what constitutes a genuine spiritual, heavenly experience. Have you encountered God? Have you met him, Christian? How do you know?

As we continue with our Advent sermon series reflecting on texts about Advent hope from the book of Isaiah, we turn today to Isaiah 6:1-13. This passage will provide us with a biblical answer to the question posed just a moment ago.

We’ll discover the answer by asking two questions of the passage.

First, we’ll examine Isaiah’s own encounter with God in verses 1-7, and we’ll draw some general principles from his experience. As we observe Isaiah’s encounter, we’ll ask: what are the biblical signs that a person has genuinely encountered God? We’ll focus on three signs from the passage: holiness, confession, and cleansing.

Second, we’ll look at verses 8-13, asking: what message does God reveal to a person who has truly encountered him? We’ll find through Isaiah’s commission that the message of one who has truly met God can be summed up in two images: **the felled oak tree** (representing sin’s comprehensive destructiveness) and **the holy stump** (representing Christ’s comprehensive salvation).

I. The signs of a genuine encounter with God

1a. Holiness: the first sign of a genuine encounter with God is a profound experience of God's holiness

Verse one tells us that Isaiah's vision of the Lord occurred, "in the year that King Uzziah died." This seemingly peripheral piece of information about Israel's king is illuminated by the inclusion of another king in verse 5, "the King, the Lord Almighty."

The bookends of these two kings—one human, the divine—sums up a major emphasis in the book of Isaiah: the people continually place their trust in human rulers rather than in the rule, reign, and wisdom of God. And as a result they become dull, blind, and incapable of truly perceiving God, reality, and even themselves.

This dullness is certainly not a result of any deficiency in God. In Isaiah God is hardly presented as ignorable.

Rather, he is described as an all-encompassing, glorious being whose comprehensive holiness and majesty fills the entire creation.

- The **three-fold repetition of holy, holy, holy**, is a Hebrew literary device used to express the perfect totality of God's holiness, which means his unique, status as perfectly set-apart, perfectly pure, perfect in character, wisdom and

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- the hem of his robe fills the entire temple,
- the whole earth is filled with his glory.

Transition: The first sign of a genuine encounter with God is a sense of the all-encompassing holiness of God.

Ib. Confession: the second sign of a genuine encounter with God is the impulse to respond to God's holiness by acknowledging and confessing sin (vv. 4-5)

Looking to verses 4-5,

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 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; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Every aspect of verse 5 is incredibly instructive here.

- First, faced with God's perfect holiness, Isaiah invokes a curse on himself. “Woe is me” is literally rendered “woe *against* me.”
- Second, Isaiah then gives a reason for the curse, as it says in the ESV: “Woe is me, **for I am lost.**”
 - The word translated as “lost” is also elsewhere rendered: ‘**undone**’, ‘**ruined**’, ‘**stabbed**,’ or even ‘**silenced**.’
 - The original hearers would have picked up on the wordplay here between the “being destroyed” and “being silenced”
 - Isaiah does not respond to God's holy presence by cavalierly joining in singing with the Seraphim
 - In the holy presence of God, Isaiah naturally defaults to penitence before presuming to join in praise.

The concept of being destroyed by the sight or presence of God is not Isaiah invented. We can find this phenomenon throughout Scripture.

- In **1 Sam 6** God strikes down seventy people because they looked into the ark of the covenant [you might think, ‘I remember that from Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark, but not 1 Samuel]; and
- **Ex 33:20** when God warns Moses, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

It's worth pausing here for a moment: is this our experience with our encounters with God?

I don't mean, 'do we regularly receive visits from singing Seraphim who belt out the classic hymn 'Holy, Holy, Holy.' I'm not talking about a literal one-to-one correspondence. I mean, do you respond to God's holy presence with an instant acknowledgement of sin and compulsion to confess sin? Do we have *that* kind of a response when we encounter God?

Application – The heart of confession

In the confession from the Holy Communion service of the Book of Common Prayer, we pray

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
maker of all things, judge of all men:

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness . . .

We do earnestly repent,
and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings;
the remembrance of them is grievous unto us,
the burden of them is intolerable.

We should ask, do we naturally "acknowledge and bewail our sins," in God's presence, or do we incorporate sin into our lives and go on about in God's presence rather unphased by it.

Does our **relationship with Christ generate** frequent, genuine, and heart-felt repentance, or does our faith **function like a garnish or a condiment applied to an already customized meal that would work just fine without the 'seasoning' of a bit of old-time religion?**

Is there are a part of us that hears the old Prayer Book confession and thinks, 'now this sounds like some classic, medieval, religious guilt-tripping, here. It's a bit much, isn't it?

That sort of a response can serve as a warning sign to indicate that we are drifting away from the holy smoke of penitence in the divine presence of God, and that we are getting lost in the idolatrous fog of self-justifying humanism.

The person who has truly encountered the living God sincerely prays,

"Apart from your grace, O Lord, there is no health in us" – not as a concession, but as a confession.

Application 2 – Natural revelation

There are many ways to experience God. Even people of other faiths, or no faiths can experience something about God in nature, through a beautiful, orange and red sky bursting forth over the horizon as the sun sets, or by staring into the eyes of a newborn baby.

The Bible teaches,

The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork (Psa. 19:1 NKJV)

Yet, these general revelations of God's existence rarely lead us from a state of awe into a state of profound awareness of our sin. No one looks at the beauty of a cloud or a night sky blanketed with stars in Nova Scotia, and says,

‘Woe is me! I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips.’

To experience this kind of conviction, we need more than general revelation; we must personally encounter the living God as he comes to us today, not by the Seraphim carrying tongs with fiery coal, but through God's Word and through God's Spirit.

- Read p. 82, *Quaerite Dominum*.
- Share about and show the *Student Life Application Bible*
- Read the relevant part of the inside note

Transition: The holiness of God elicits a response that sees us acknowledging and confessing sin. And in a genuine biblical encounter with God, the act of confession is always answered by the grace of cleansing.

Ib. Cleansing (vv. 6-7)

Notice the language of verses 6-7,

⁶Then one of the seraphim **flew to me**, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs **from the altar**. ⁷And **he touched my mouth** and said:

“Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Here, atonement is initiated by God. The Seraphim move **from** God, **from** the holy altar, **toward** Isaiah.

While the ESV renders the pronouncement, “your guilt is taken away, and your sin **atoned for**” the NRSV renders the second phrase “your sin is **blotted out**.”

“Blot out” is more specific than “atoned for.” It shows that the grace offered in the divine encounter deals **not only** with **the concept of propitiation** (acquittal, forgiveness) but of **expiation** (cleansing).

- What is needed for fellowship with God, for human flourishing, for salvation, is both acquittal and cleansing.
- A person can be forgiven in a courtroom but still carry the shame of uncleanness.
- The refining fire of God’s holiness **removes both guilt and shame**, both **condemnation and uncleanness**.

Transition: We have seen in verses 1-7 that a biblical encounter with God includes: a reverent awareness of **God’s holy presence**, which prompts **a personal confession of sin, followed by an atoning cleansing from sin**. An encounter with the living God never leaves us undone and ruined; it lifts us up from our ruin and applies a cleansing application of gospel grace. But true divine encounter leads not only to conversion, and confession—but also to a commission.

II. The message of a commissioned disciple

Ila. The nature of the commission

When in verse 8 the Lord asks,

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Isaiah volunteers for the job immediately. Even **before he discovers the message** the Lord will ask him to proclaim. He responds,

“Here I am! Send me.”

You have to wonder if Isaiah had second thoughts when he received his official marching orders from the Lord. It’s not exactly a peppy, rosy message. Isaiah is tasked with telling God’s people:

- you think you hear, but you have no true understanding
- you think you see, but lack right perception
- you are dull of heart, and incapable of truly knowing God, your neighbor, or even yourselves

It's not the kind of message that would be your first choice for a gospel tract. It's that time of the year that many of you here are putting together Christmas cards, set to go into the mail in just a week or two.

Imagine choosing this message for your Christmas cards? It's true. It's biblical? Imagine your friend opening the nice festive green envelope, smiling as they look at your wonderful glossy family photo. And then they read your warm, glad tidings:

Season's Greetings. You are dull, spiritually blind, and you lack total understanding.
Merry Christmas, sincerely the Grinch who ruined Advent *and* Christmas

This message could seem like a cruel jest, but Isaiah is simply being asked to communicate **the cold, hard reality of human life apart from a redemptive relationship God**. He's not causing that reality to exist; he's being asked to proclaim a spiritual reality that already exists. **Isaiah is spiritually saying the quiet part out loud.**

God commissions Isaiah to pronounce **a diagnosis of humanity's insurmountable spiritual lack** and **humanity's devastating spiritual deficit apart from God**. The very willingness to proclaim such a stark diagnosis is further evidence that a genuine encounter with God has indeed occurred.

IIb. The felled oak and the holy stump (vv. 11-13)

In response to this commission, Isaiah asks: "How long, O Lord?" The prophet is not merely wondering 'how long do I have to preach this depressing message' but 'will this bad news ever be replaced with good news—with the gospel news of hope and redemption?'

In verses 11-13, God answers in a way that only serves to amplify the absolutely devastating impact of sin on humanity and creation.

"Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is a desolate waste,
¹²and the Lord removes people far away,
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

The resulting exile is described in terms of a complete clearing out of the people and the land. Such a sweeping doctrine of sin requires an equally extensive doctrine of salvation.

And though a tenth remain in it,

it will be burned⁶ again,

like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump ^kremains
when it is felled.”

‘The holy seed’ is its stump.

Our guilt that was taken away in Isaiah 6:7 is the same word elsewhere translated as “iniquities.” In taking the judgment of sin upon his shoulders Jesus took on note only the hope of restoration and resurrection in the holy stump; he bore the sin of the felled oak. In Isaiah 53, we learn that Christ the oak that was felled for the sins of the world,

...was pierced for our transgressions;

he was **crushed for our iniquities**;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and **the LORD has laid on him**

the iniquity of us all.

Likewise, the exile, pronounced in Isa. 6:12 against the people of God is taken on by Jesus, the holy seed, the holy stump, and the felled oak on behalf of his people. There God says “the LORD **removes people far away**, and the **forsaken places** are many in the midst of the land.

But because of Christ, what is removed “far away” is not God’s people, not us, not you; what is removed is our sin, by Christ the oak that was felled for the sins of the world. The same word that is used here for “removed far away” is used in Psalm 103:12 where the gospel is proclaimed in advance,

as far as the east is from the west,

so far does **he remove our transgressions from us.**

Because of Christ, instead of the heritage of God’s people being the “forsaken places in the land,” Jesus Christ himself becomes forsaken, a felled oak forsaken in order that we might be forgiven. And he cries out in his substitutionary death on the cross, the words of Psalm

22, absorbing the God-forsakenness of every child of God, crying out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

And because of his forsakenness, we can claim the gospel promises of:

- **Is. 54:7** For a brief moment **I deserted you,**
but with great compassion I will gather you.
- **Is. 62:12** ⁱAnd they shall be called The Holy People,
The Redeemed of the LORD;
^kand you shall be called Sought Out,
A City Not Forsaken
- **Psa. 94:14** ^mFor the LORD will not forsake his ⁿpeople;
he will not abandon his ⁿheritage;

And last of all, the felled oak, burned over by the consuming fire of God’s holiness, sprouts Advent hope through a holy seed, buried deep within the roots of the holy stump. And there, in verse 13, we find yet another reason for our high hope. There we find the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” and the “branch from his roots that bears fruit,” spoken about later in Isaiah in chapter 11 is the crucified and resurrected Christ. The one who has taken on both the fate of the felled oak tree and the hope of the holy seed in the stump of Jesse that remained.

And maybe, if we think back far enough, all the way to the Garden, and we think forward far enough, all the way to the final chapter of the book of Revelation we might rejoice in the Advent hope of that final tree, springing from the salvation of the felled oak and the holy seed, the tree of life.

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** down the middle of the great street of the city. **On each side of the river stood the tree of life**, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And **the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.**

Discussion Questions

- (1) When you come into the presence of God, is your inclination to recognize your infinite spiritual need in the light of God's infinite, super-abundant holiness and glory? If yes, describe your experience of this. If no, how would you describe your self-perception in presence of a holy God?
- (2) Christ sums up both the god-forsakenness, guilt, and exile of Israel in his death and resurrection. He functions as both the felled oak of God's judgement and the holy stump of God's redemptive hope. How does Jesus' vocation taking on Israel's exile, forsakenness, and guilt in his person, as the faithful Israelite, hold both Testaments together without making 'the Old' (Plan A) to be replaced by 'the New' 'Plan B'? Would we have any stable hope in Christ if the good news of the gospel replaced (rather than fulfilled) the prior promises of God?
- (3) Some will say that a 'high view of sin' is a vestige of medieval guilt culture. Why not have a more 'positive' message they'll say. But wow might a clear understanding of the devastating comprehensiveness of sin cause us to more greatly understand, appreciate, and exalt the amazing comprehensiveness of redemption in Christ?
- (4) How can we hold a thoroughly biblical anthropology that takes seriously the destructive nature of sin without experiencing low self-worth, and low self-confidence? Does holding a pervasive view of sin (sometimes called total depravity or total inability) necessarily result in low self esteem? How can we avoid conflating the two?
- (5) Have you truly trusted in the promise that both your guilt and shame are taken through the propitiation (acquittal and removal of judgment) and expiation (cleansing/blotting out) of sin? Given that we are still sinners, even after we believe in Christ, how can we live in the finished work of Christ, the felled oak for our sins and the holy stump of our hope, rather than existing in state of endless existential exile, constantly trying to carry the guilt and/or shame that Christ died to free us from?