

WHY THIS SERMON WILL FAIL

4th in a Series on the Character of God Called, “Indescribable”- Topic: The Holiness of God

America put a couple of astronauts into space yesterday, the first time since 2011 that our nation has been able to achieve that feat. In light of our return to manned space flight I thought it appropriate to begin with a true story dating back to the time when we were landing people on the moon. One member of that very small fraternity of 24 men who have been to the moon was a man named Stuart Roosa. After his successful Apollo 14 moon mission he and his wife, Joan, were on a trip to Nepal in 1975. During the trip he gave a talk about his flight to the moon at a school. After his talk there was a question and answer session, and he found it odd that several of the students asked, “Who did you see there?” He answered that there is no one on the moon. A murmur went through the room, and then a student asked again who they had seen there. He said, “There is nothing there. Not even wind. There is nothing.”

They found out that after the Roosas had left the teacher told the children, “You don’t need to listen to him. He’s wrong.” Stuart was distressed when he learned that some of the Nepalese believe that the spirits of their ancestors reside on the moon. He had essentially told them there was no heaven. One day at their hotel Joan went to a hairdresser. The woman giving her a shampoo said, “You’re married to the astronaut, aren’t you?” Joan said, “Yes, I am.” The woman then said, “You know, you’re married to a god.” Joan laughed it off, but that evening as they went to an event all along the road children were kneeling with candles in an act of reverence.

Having an inaccurate understanding of who God is will have a significant effect on us and can easily spin our lives off in a strange direction. Today we will look at a characteristic of God that is central to his being. Understanding this aspect of God will keep us from thinking a remarkable man is something more than human. It will remind us of the truly, absolutely unique character of God. To see this we will start with a peek at a scene in heaven as revealed to the apostle John.

GOD IS HOLY

Revelation 15:3-4 gives us a glimpse into heaven. A large crowd of people in heaven singing. Verses 3-4 tell us the lyrics of their song. “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone

are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

There is a tremendous amount of theology packed into those few words. We see God’s greatness and might, his justice and truth, his rule over all the world. But the words I want to focus on today are “for you alone are holy.” This statement is a bit like the one we looked at last week that said God is “the only wise God.” We learned that there are wise people, but that no being is wise in the way God is wise. Similarly, there are other beings that are holy, for in Mark 8:38 Jesus referred to God’s holy angels. God calls people to be holy and even says we are his holy people. But no one is holy the way God is holy.

In 1 Samuel 2:2 Hannah prayed, “There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides him.” In Luke 1:49 Mary said, “The Mighty One has done great things for me, holy is his name.” Wait, isn’t his name God? Or, no, I know, it’s Yahweh, isn’t it? Now Mary claims his name is holy? Is that like his last name, or maybe his first and God is his last name? This doesn’t mean he literally is named “Holy” the way my wife is named “Laurie.” Psalm 33:21 says of the Lord, “In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.”

You have probably heard at some point when someone has done something really crummy people say about that person, “His name is mud.” They don’t mean that when he meets you he would say, “Hi, I’m Mud Myatt.” At a conference he wouldn’t wear a name tag that says, “Hi, my name is Mud.” What that means is that person’s reputation is mud, something dirty and worthless. That individual is known for something very negative.

When Mary said the Lord’s name is holy and when the Psalmist wrote “we trust in his holy name” they were both using “name” in the sense of reputation, what the Lord is known for. The person whose name is mud is known for a less than sterling character. When we hear God’s name is holy it is referring to his character. His character is holy.

God’s character is that he is holy, and that he is uniquely holy. Isaiah 40:25 quotes the Lord saying, “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.” Holiness is so uniquely the character of God that he is called “the Holy One.” 50 times in the Bible God is called “the Holy One.” He is not a holy one, he is the Holy One.

This aspect of God is highlighted in the vision Isaiah was given of God's throne as recorded in Isaiah 6. There are some unusual beings surrounding God's throne. Do you remember what they were saying? "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." In 1 John the apostle wrote "God is love." That is absolutely true. But the angels were not calling out, "Loving, loving, loving is the Lord Almighty." God is certainly powerful, and is at times referred to as the Almighty or the Mighty One, but the angels were not calling out, "Mighty, mighty, mighty is the Lord Almighty." They were saying "Holy, holy, holy."

The repetition is for emphasis. God is not just holy. And he is not merely holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. That is a way of saying that he is as holy as it is possible to be. The very essence of God's character is that he is the Holy One, he is holy in a way that no other being or thing is holy.

HOLINESS IS BEAUTIFUL

Today we have a problem with the concept of holiness. In our culture to be holy often, maybe generally, is not considered a good thing. What comes in your mind when you think of someone as holy? It is common to think of a person who is "holy" as someone who is very religious, very serious, humorless, kind of aloof, and generally just no fun at all. The word "pious" comes to mind, along with a sort of "ick" kind of reaction. The terms holy and buzzkill are almost synonymous. This is a person most people would like to avoid.

Another picture people often have in their minds is that a person who is "holy" is hypocritical. They think of people who are "holier than thou" in their attitudes, focused on unimportant things that they think they are better at than other people, all while actually being kind of miserable human beings. That idea tends to cause another connotation of holy as meaning maybe arrogant, but definitely narrow, condemning or judgmental. The holy person looks down their nose at other people and condemns them. Even worse, people attribute that quality to God. They see him as condemning and judgmental, and thus would like to avoid him if at all possible.

These sorts of images are all too common when people think of what being holy is all about. But I would like to give you a different picture. I'd like you to picture a couple of different scenes. First, picture yourself going to the National Archives in Washington D.C. That building is right on Pennsylvania Avenue down the street from that big house you see on TV a lot, the white one. There are some very interesting things to see in the National Archives, but the star of the show is a parchment document that is 244 years old. Of course you know that it is the

Declaration of Independence. It is kept in a special case that protects it from the elements and from human beings, and it is carefully guarded. You must wait your turn to enter the building and then the room it is kept in, and you file past the case that holds the document. You have only a brief time when it is your turn to look at that parchment. What do you feel when you see it? Isn't there a sense of awe, wonder, almost reverence? On that document are words that have changed the world, that have brought hope and freedom to millions of people. It is a truly revolutionary work. The power of it is almost overwhelming, and seeing it in real life is humbling, but causes us to feel so very thankful. When I saw that I got kind of choked up. I realize that I've become stupidly sentimental in my old age and I get choked up with disappointing regularity. But this truly touched my heart. And besides, I'm not that bad. I don't get choked up at commercials the way my wife does. Well, at least not most of the time. Okay, some of the time.

Now I'd like you to picture another scene. I am going to offer you two alternatives. You can pick whichever one works best for you. Option A is a scene in the mountains. You have hiked into the forest and you have reached a destination you were seeking, a magnificent, pristine lake. The water is a deep blue, the thick forest comes right down to the shore of the lake, and soaring in the background are spectacular peaks. No other humans are around to spoil the scene. It is so magnificent, so beautiful it is hard to believe it is real.

Option B is for those who are more beach than mountain. You come upon a deserted tropical beach. It is a broad swath of soft, white sand, bordered by palm trees and lush tropical vegetation. Mixed in the flora are fragrant plumeria trees, hibiscus plants sporting glorious colors and vibrant orchids. The ocean water can hardly be described. It is clear and clean, a vivid turquoise color that feels impossible that nature could create. You are the only ones to see the gentle waves rolling onto that spectacular beach while the palm trees are swaying in the light tropical breeze. It is so beautiful it almost hurts.

Whichever of those options works best for you, what are you feeling as you gaze on this scene? Isn't there a sense of joy, a peacefulness in your soul, a desire to be able to somehow enter into such beauty, to hold onto it forever, to see it never, ever spoiled in any way? Isn't there, again, almost a sense of awe at such beauty and a powerful feeling of gratitude? Doesn't it just make you happy?

I submit to you that both of those scenes, the one with that document and the one from nature, are both set apart. They are scenes that you will remember forever.

There is nothing quite like them. They are holy, different from anything else. That document is a sacred document, a holy piece of work. Those scenes are holy, unique and powerful in your memory.

Notice in Revelation 15:4 that we looked at earlier it said, “who will not bring glory to your name, for you alone are holy.” There is a connection between glory and holiness. Holiness is glorious. Exodus 15:11 says of God, “Who is like your majestic holiness, awesome in glory.” Holiness is majestic, it is awesome in glory. Psalm 29:2 says, “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.” There it is again. Holiness and glory. The Lord’s holiness has splendor. In other words, it is spectacular, it is beautiful, it is glorious.

Just like that parchment is holy and thus touches our hearts, humbles us, causes us to rejoice and be thankful, so God’s holiness does the same. Just like those scenes from nature are glorious, are holy, so God’s splendor and holiness will impact us. It will give us joy, make us grateful, humble us, and make us peaceful and happy!

So no, holiness is not something to be avoided. It is not negative. It is not dull, killing our fun, it is not condemning and judgmental. It is beautiful and awesome. It is full of splendor, it is glorious, it is life giving, life affirming, it is joyful.

But what does it mean to be holy? What is holiness? The root of the Hebrew word that is translated “holy” meant to divide, cut or separate. So to say God is holy means he is separate. Separate from what? How is God separate? How is he holy? First, God is set apart from evil. We saw this a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the goodness of God. Remember there is no hint of evil anywhere in God. He is absolute, unalloyed good. In 1 John 1:5 the apostle John wrote, “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” How much darkness is there in light? None. Light is the opposite of darkness. Dark is the absence of light. Similarly there is no evil in God. God is the complete absence of evil. Evil, in a sense, is the absence of God.

Stephen Charnock wrote in his book, *The Existence And Attributes Of God*, that God, “is pure and unmixed light, free from all blemish in his essence, nature and operations...It is a less injury to deny his being, then to deny the purity of it.”

It is nearly impossible for us to conceive of what a person would be like who is totally free of any hint of evil, who is utterly pure good. But what we need to be clear about is that such a person would be a truly beautiful person. By definition

evil is bad, even in the smallest doses. Evil does harm. It hurts, it destroys. That is why it is called evil. Our culture wants to think that a little evil is exciting and maybe fun. Nothing could be further from the truth. Would you say cancer is exciting and fun? I once had a little bit of skin cancer on the top of my foot, of all places. Hey, that's not a big deal. It's not something like lung cancer or pancreatic cancer, right? My doctor didn't think that little spot of cancer was no big deal, and it certainly was not fun. He sent me to a specialist and they cut that thing out. They didn't mess around with it. They cut away tissue around the spot to make sure they got it all, because if even the tiniest bit of it remained it would do damage. Evil, in any amount or any form, is worse than cancer. Even one cell of it has the potential for great harm. It will do harm to the person in whom the evil exists, and it likely will hurt others also.

We can measure how lovely, how wonderful a person is by the level of evil in them. The less there is, the more we are going to be drawn to that person and be able to trust them. The English word "holy" comes from an ancient Anglo Saxon root word, *halig*. It is a form of the word *hal*. That word meant "whole" or healthy. We still use that word in English today in the form of hale. To be hearty and hale is to be healthy and fully alive. In other words, to be holy is to be healthy. To the degree that a person is not holy that individual is not healthy. They are sick. Holiness is healthiness.

God is absolutely holy. That means he is absolutely healthy. He is the most wonderful being, the loveliest being we could ever meet, because he is the healthiest, the most wonderful that it is possible to be. In other words, he is the most appealing, safest, most trustworthy being it would ever be possible to know.

Second, God is set apart from all others, in that he is different from all other beings. Remember in Exodus 15:11 it asked "Who is like your majestic holiness, awesome in glory?" The implication was no one. Isaiah 40:25 has God asking, "To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?" Again the answer is no one. You cannot compare God to anyone or anything.

Jeremiah 10:6 says, "No one is like you, Lord; you are great and your name is mighty in power. Verse 7 ends by saying again, "There is no one like you." That message that there is no one like God is repeated in Exodus 8:10, 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Samuel 7:22; Psalm 86:8 and Isaiah 46:9. When a message is repeated so often in God's Word we surely should pay attention. God is uniquely holy. There is no one like him.

So much of the time we understand things by comparing them. Have you noticed that part of our efforts to comprehend this new virus that has unraveled our world involves comparing it with other viruses? There is much discussion of similarities and differences between it and SARS, MERS, the flu, the Spanish flu, the swine flu and the Hong Kong flu. I watched the NFL draft last month because in this sports starved desert we're struggling through it was the only live sports related event that has happened since early March. It was interesting to note how as the "experts" were talking about the players being drafted they invariably looked for known NFL players to compare them with. That's how we get a sense of things. But you can't do that with God. There is no one to compare him with.

That makes sense when you think about it. How many all-powerful creators of all things could there be? How many beings existed before the creation of all things? There is only one being like that, which means there is no one like him. This has some big significance for how we think of God. In his book, *The Gospel According To Job*, Mike Mason wrote, "We need the kind of faith whose God is so big as to be not just unmanageable, but to a large extent (as paradoxical as this may sound) unknowable...It is much easier to use one's mind to reduce God to understandable proportions than it is to accommodate oneself to the divine mystery. It is easier to diminish God than to enlarge one's heart."

Stephen Charnock wrote, "Whatsoever a human tongue can speak, or an angelical understanding thinks of the excellency of his (God's) nature, falls short of the vastness of the divine perfection." As I was preparing for this talk I thought about that quote. Charnock said correctly that anything a human can say about God's perfection and his holiness inevitably will fall short. It made me think that this whole endeavor is a fool's errand. This sermon is destined to fail, because it is not possible for me to completely and accurately describe the holiness of God. It is not possible for any human. That, of course, didn't stop me from trying.

We can get a clue about the holiness of God just by thinking about how he does things. People are in rebellion against God, choosing evil instead of him. So he chooses to go and die for them to save them. That's just not how we would do things. God is so different that we can't really even begin to comprehend how vast the difference actually is.

IMPLICATIONS

CALM DOWN, BECAUSE GOD IS HOLY

There are an awful lot of things about God that we don't understand. There's that thing about God coming into this world by being born to a young woman and

being a helpless human infant. Have you been around a baby recently? They can't do anything. Well, they can eat, sleep, cry and poop, but that's pretty much it. Almighty God became one of those? How could that even be possible? Who was running the universe while God was a 3 month old? Well, see, God the Father was running things. Yeah, about that. How does that God is 3 persons but 1 being thing work? That's not possible. Then there's that thing about God says we have to choose to believe in Jesus to have eternal life, but then he also says God chose us in Jesus before he created the world. Which is it? Do I choose or does God choose me? God says, "It's both." I don't understand how that could possibly be. God says, "Yes, I know. You can't. I haven't asked you to understand. I've asked you to believe."

Theologians have, for centuries have debated how God's sovereignty can work and still have human responsibility for choices, about the nature of the Trinity, about how prayer works. If you think about some of these things for a while it will start to drive you crazy because you can't figure it out. God says, "Calm down, because I am holy." He is separate, set apart from all others. There is no one like him, so there is no one who can understand truly and completely how and why he does what he does and exists the way he exists. The only way you could understand all of that would be to be him. So calm down, remember that he is holy, and accept that you will not understand all about him, but you can believe in him.

This has some very practical implications for us at times, because things are going to happen in all of our lives that will make us question what God is doing, or whether he is even there. Those are the times when we have to remember that we are not going to understand why God does what he does and allows what he allows. Instead, we are to calm down, and like Job, say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

ADORE HIM, BECAUSE GOD IS HOLY

God is holy. That means he is the healthiest, most wonderful, most magnificent, the most splendid, the best being in existence. We should be in awe of him and his holiness. We should stand before him in wonder and reverence.

Revelation 4:11 reveals that in heaven there are beings around the throne of God who worship him saying, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." He is worthy. He is deserving of praise. Psalm 99:3 says of all the nations, in other words, of all of us, "Let them praise your great and awesome name, he is holy."

I've not been a big concert goer mostly because concerts are expensive and I've generally not had the money for them. But I have been to some over the years. During the lockdown we've all had a lot of time to reflect and think. At one point I was thinking about the concerts I've attended. Some have been excellent; some have been just all right. But there aren't many moments that I recall from most of them. There was one moment that stood out. It was a long time ago. I was in college, so this would have been just after the Revolutionary War ended. Okay, it wasn't that long ago, but it was a long time ago, long enough that the concert was put on by the duo called Simon and Garfunkel. Yeah, it was that far back. I know, if there are some younger people listening you're saying, "Simon and who? I've never heard of them." It was a real thing. You can Google it. The moment that was so memorable from that event came when they sang a new song. My memory could well be in error on this point, but I vaguely recall them saying it was the first time they performed it in concert. None in the audience had ever heard it before. The song was *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*. It was a beautiful, powerful song, and they did a great job with it. The response to the song was immediate. People cheered wildly for it. It was such a beautiful, moving moment that I, along with everyone else, felt compelled to clap and cheer. I just had to, because the song and the performance was worthy of being honored. It demanded it.

God is worthy of our cheering him, our serving him, our devotion to him because he is the Holy One. When we see him as he is we will be compelled to worship him. We will be compelled, as well, to love him and draw near to him.

There is that interesting story in Isaiah 6 where the prophet was given a glimpse of the throne of God. He saw God in his holiness and his glory. It was a devastating moment for him. The brilliant, piercing light of God's holiness highlighted for Isaiah the truth about himself. He said, "Woe is me. I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips." I'm pretty sure Isaiah censored what he really said. I think it was more like, "Oh, POOP! I'm toast." Only likely in stronger terms. He saw the evil in himself and said essentially that everything that came out of him is tainted. That's what he meant by having unclean lips. He was sort of like a guy who misunderstands the nature of an event he is invited to and shows up right after a surf session wearing board shorts, T shirt and flip flops, only to discover it is a formal event and everyone else is in tuxedos and evening gowns. He is conspicuous and self-conscious. For Isaiah it was way more than that, because he was guilty and ashamed. But God has one of his angels touch Isaiah's mouth with a live coal, symbolizing cauterizing his guilt and forgiving it. Isaiah saw the holy grace of God extended to him. Then God said, "I've got this mission, but I wonder

who could carry it out.” Verse 8 says Isaiah piped up, “Here am I. Send me!” I’m pretty sure what really happened was Isaiah was jumping up and down, raising his hand and saying, “Oh! Oh! Me! Me! Send me!” When he saw God’s holiness and he experienced the magnificent, holy mercy, grace and love of God, he wanted nothing as much as he wanted to love and serve God. And that’s what God’s holiness should do for us.

BE HOLY, BECAUSE GOD IS HOLY

There are a couple of amazing verses I want you to notice. One is 2 Peter 1:2. First it says that God has called us by his own glory and goodness. Then it says, “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature.” Did you catch that last phrase? God has given his promises so that we might participate in the divine nature. He wants us to actually begin to have that same nature that he has, that holy nature. He wants us to begin to be holy like he is holy. Not pious, rigid, judgmental, hypocritical and dour. But whole, healthy, good, true, loving and alive.

Hebrews 12:10 says something similar. In verse 9 the writer mentioned how parents discipline children, then in verse 10 he wrote, “They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.” Did you see that? God wants us to share in his holiness! In 1 Peter 1:16 he said, “Be holy, because I am holy.”

This is a source of great encouragement for us. Remember what we said about holiness. It is beautiful, it is full of life, it is healthy, it is good, majestic and full of splendor, it is glorious. And God is working so that we might share in all of that! This is what God want for us. Some day we will experience it to the full. But even now God is working in us so that more and more we might be holy as he is holy.

So what must we do? We should know that this is our calling and our destiny. We are called to be a holy people. We should not settle for anything less. We should pursue this by believing God’s promises always with all our hearts. We should pursue holiness by knowing God, seeing his holiness, loving him, adoring him, worshiping him above all else, and asking him to make us holy. That’s a prayer he’s eager to answer.