I. Set Up

II. Intro

A. What is God like?

1. It's an important question. In The Knowledge of the Holy, AW Tozer said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

2. CS Lewis said, "What we think about God is the second most important thing about us."[1] Arguing that what God thinks about us is more important. But their points are essentially the same. What we think about God matters. It shapes us.[2]

B. So, what is God like?

C. We're just back from the Reformation tour.

1. We spent time in Prague focusing on Jan Hus – a 15th century Pre-reformer. And then we were in Germany – focusing on Martin Luther. Then it was Geneva, Switzerland to learn about John Calvin, who wrote the Institutes, which opens with him making a point that sets up today's passage:

a) All true wisdom consists of two things: "the knowledge of God and of ourselves." And he went on to say: we never see ourselves clearly "unless we have first looked upon God's face"

D. So, what is God like?

E. It's worth noting that:

1. We cannot know God exhaustively. *Finitum non capax* infiniti: the finite cannot grasp the infinite. We can only take in so much. Here is yesterday's picture of Auggie. He's decked out in Iowa Hawkeye gear, which didn't help the Hawkeyes. I share it to make this point: he is coming to know and trust the love of his parents, but he does not begin to understand who they are or what is going on. The same is true for us. Our understanding of God is limited.

2. It's also worth noting that we learn about God by studying his revelation of himself to us. There are two big ways he tells us who He is. The first is through what he made. Theologians refer to this as General Revelation.

a) Paul talks about it in Romans 1, when he writes, "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities" – what God is like – have been on display so anyone willing to look can see and know.

b) As an aside, let me note that the more we know about creation the more people are saying, There is an amazing God. It's become a thing for various people to talk about how Richard Dawkins has led them to faith in Christ, because his arguments against it are not working.

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c) And there are a growing number in the tech world – Elon Musk and others – who now say, we're living in a simulated game because the universe is too finely tuned to have evolved.

d) So, the first way we learn about God is by looking at what he made. We look around because, "The heavens declare the glory of God."

e) But that is not enough. You cannot get the gospel by watching a sunset. Creation does not tell you that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead. The good news is news. It has to be shared. Someone told you and you and I are expected to tell others.

3. So, God has given us more. The second way God reveals himself is called Special revelation. We look at the supernatural ways God has made himself known. We look at his words and deeds in history, supremely in Jesus Christ, and through Scripture.

a) The major way we know what God the Father is like is by looking at God the Son. He is "the image of the invisible God."

b) And we also have the Word of God written. The Bible. We have this God-given testimony that tells us the story, introduces us to Jesus and teaches us to understand what God has done.

c) In 2 Timothy 3 we are told to study the book to know what we need to know.

F. Today we're turning to Isaiah 6 – which is from the Word of God written.

1. Isaiah is one of the major prophets. (The majors are not more important than the minor prophets, but they wrote much longer books. Isaiah, along with, Ezekiel and Daniel, wrote a long book.

2. And it is important. The book of Isaiah is quote more often in the New Testament than any other, earning it the title, "the fifth Gospel."

3. And what we are going to get from today's passage is that God is holy.

a) From Gen. 1 we learned that he is an Almighty Creator.

b) From Gen. 15 and 22 we saw that he was shockingly, fiercely, loving.

c) From Exodus 3 we learned that He in charge. He named himself., "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be."

G. Today we see that he is holy, which is a bit hard to process. Theologians divide the study of God into two categories of his attributes.

1. Communicable attributes - his love, goodness and wisdom – things we can understand because we can be loving, good and wise. And his incommunicable attributes – his eternality, omnipresence, immutability.

2. His holiness is a bit of both. We are called to be holy. But we are not holy and the fact that we are not means we can't really understand it. We're in the deep end of the pool here. Stay with me.

III. Isaiah 6

A. In the year that King Uzziah died

1. Isaiah lived and worked in Jerusalem in the 8th century B.C. The event he is writing about happened in 740 BC. And it was a big deal – like 9/11 or COVID or the 2007-8 financial upset – it was a way people dated this. Uzziah had reigned – and for the most part – reigned well, for 52 years. Under his rule, Judah had prospered. Few living at the time he died had ever known another leader.

   a) He wasn't perfect, and in fact, like many in the Bible, his life did not end well. He got a bit self-important, walked into the temple and tried to do some jobs reserved for priests. And God had struck him with leprosy. And he lived his last years in isolation.[3] But that is another sermon.

2. For our purposes, the "year King Uzziah died" should have us think:

   a) In a year of significant political disruption.

   b) And in the year that the king who presumed on God's holiness died

B. **I saw the Lord:** Isaiah walked into the same temple where Uzziah, the king, had tried to act like a priest, and he met the real King.

C. **High and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple**.

1. In the ancient world, the longer the train, the greater the king. This one fills the whole building.

2. By the way, it's worth reminding ourselves that, in a year were there is a lot of panic – the AI apocalypse, contentious elections, riots in France - God is on his throne. This ends well. Eternity changes everything. Whatever is going on in Washington, or New York, or Prague or Paris - or around your kitchen table - God is still on the throne. Our comprehension of his plans are a bit like Auggie's. What we do not know is a lot. But we can learn to trust our father.

D. Above him were seraphim (These are a special kind of angel – specifically created to hang out in the throne room of God), **each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.**

1. Even these sinless, blazing creatures cover their faces. They can't look straight at God's glory.

E. **And they were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty**; There are a few things to see here. The first two come from Sproul:

1. This passage opened, in the year king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. Here he talks about the Lord Almighty. They are actually different Hebrew words. The first is Adonai – the term for master. The second is Yahweh. – the holy name of God. Early Jewish scribes were so shaken by God's holiness that before they would write Yahweh, they would stop, take a ritual bath, pray, get a new pen and then write it. Doing this every time they had to write the term. At some point they replaced Yahweh with a sort of made up term that would remind them that they were not going to say Yahweh and would say Lord instead. But it wasn't just Lord. In some English translations they capitalize the "o r d" to make this clear.

2. Also note, the term holy is repeated three times for emphasis. This is one of the few times in the Bible anything gets elevated three times. And it is the only attribute of God that is. We are not told that God is love, love, love. Or merciful, merciful, merciful. But holy, holy, holy. This is perhaps the central quality of God.[4]

3. What does it mean to say he is holy? Well – I will remind you – we are not holy enough to really grasp it. We are highly valued and greatly loved, but deeply broken. The distance between Hitler and us is tiny compared to the distance between a holy God and us. Technically speaking, the Hebrew term – *qadosh* - means set apart, utterly other.

4. We are being told that God is not just a bigger, better version of us. He is in a category all his own. His majesty and moral purity are beyond us.

F. **The whole earth is full of his glory.** The Hebrew word for glory – *kavod* - carries the idea of weight. Substantive. In *The Great Divorce* – Lewis has a bus load of people from hell go on a field trip to heaven, and one of the first things that happens is they can't walk on the grass, because they lack any weight. They are less real, less "weighty" than those in heaven. Compared to God, everything else in life is lighter than we think. God is heavier than we imagine.

G. V4: "**At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."** Smoke is the sign of God's presence: Sinai was wrapped in smoke. A cloud filled Solomon's temple. The building itself can't stand still in his presence.

H. V5: "**Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined!"** Isaiah says, "I'm undone. I'm cut off. I am unable to stand. He's not undone by the seraphim or the smoke. It's God. He is having the same response Moses, Job, Ezekiel, Peter and John had. He has seen the King.".

1. You've heard me note that when an angel shows up, the first thing it almost always says is, "Fear not." That is because they are so good, so pure, that they overwhelm people. Well, multiply that by 100X – or ten million X - for God.

I. **For I am a man of unclean lips -** he recognizes his own sin – and notice where he localizes his guilt on his lips, which was arguably his best quality. As a prophet his mouth was his instrument. God put his finger on the place Isaiah thought he was strongest.

1. If you had asked Isaiah what his best features were – why God should love him – he might have said his work as a prophet. This is where he is exposed.

2. What would that be for you? Do you think you're smarter than other people? Or kinder? Or that you work harder? Or that you are a better parent or friend? Or that you are better because your politics is better?

3. Isaiah is recognizing that his best is not enough. Have you recognized that?

J. **and I live among a people of unclean lips** he realizes that his people – his family, his tribe, his country - are also all broken. And in a very un 21st century American way – he sees his culpability for broken systems and national sins

K. **and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."** Woe is me. I am sunk. Isaiah - who was likely the most righteous man in Judah. Just before this – in Isaiah 5 - he pronounced six "woes" on others. Now, in God's presence, he pronounces one on himself.

L. V. 6: **"Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."**

1. Don't overlook this grace moment. Isaiah doesn't clean himself up. He doesn't promise to do better. Grace comes to him. God loves you the way you are. He is not going to leave you where you are. But God loves us in spite of our sin. This is not about us. We are not supposed to read this and think, "I'm pretty amazing. God loves me. Of course he does. I'm better than other people."

2. We are expected to think: God is amazing. He can love me even though I am not holy. Therefore, I am going to strive to be holy.

IV. Isaiah 6 moves on to God asking, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (v. 8) And Isaiah answering, "Here am I. Send me!"

A. Note the order: Isaiah sees God (1–4), sees himself (5), receives grace (6–7), and only then volunteers (8). It's not F + W = S. It is F = S + W. In this passage it is: worship, confession, cleansing and then mission.

V. There is much to ponder here.

A. It's worth noting that God sends Isaiah to do a job that proves to be very, very hard. He is to talk to people who will not listen. He's called to be faithful, not successful. (I thought about that this week because Jan Hus – the guy we went to Prague to study – did not see the results he was after. He likely died believing he had failed.

B. It's worth noting that God's holiness is not just another attribute. It's not like we can say: just as God is creator and loving and self-directed and sovereign, and he is holy. No, his holiness is a different category. His creative power is holy and his love is holy. And this means, he hates sin and evil and he will shut it down.

C. This is a point many have a hard time with. It's been said that we do not want a father in heaven. What we want is a grandfather in heaven – a very casual type who we can get to do whatever we want him to do. And along these lines, we really dislike the idea of God judging anyone. We do not like the idea of God's holiness in action. But it will be. Because God is holy, he is angry with sin and evil and he will shut it down.

1. I have struggled to find a way to capture this side of God. One of the most helpful voices for me is Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian who teaches at Yale Divinity School. He grew up in the former Yugoslavia, and in the 1990s he watched his homeland torn apart by war: villages burned, women raped, neighbors killing neighbors.

2. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf writes that many Christians in the West don't like the idea of a God who judges. He says the idea of a God who never judges is born in "the quiet of a suburban home." But it doesn't survive in a war zone. No one who has buried their family wants a God who shrugs at evil.

3. And here's what surprised me. Volf wasn't arguing for revenge. His book is about forgiveness, about embracing your enemy. His point is that it is precisely because God will judge that we don't have to. Paul says it in Romans 12: "Do not take revenge... leave room for God's wrath." If there is no holy God who will set things right, then justice is up to us, and we will either take vengeance or give up. But because God is holy, we can lay down our weapons and even forgive. His holiness isn't what makes peace impossible. It's what makes peace possible.

D. But I think the best way to give you a taste of God's holiness is to read you the story about Jill meeting Aslan – the lion figure that CS Lewis uses as the Christ figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In chapter 8 of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Susan asks whether Aslan is safe, And Mr. Beaver responds, "Safe? Safe? Who said anything about him being safe. Of course he is not safe. But he is good.

E. But the larger passage comes in chapter 2 of *The Silver Chair*, where Jill Pole, who just arrived in Narnia and is very thirsty, encounters Aslan for the first time. Lewis writes:

1. "If you are thirsty, you may drink."

2. They were the first words she had heard since Scrubb had spoken to her on the edge of the cliff. For a second she stared here and there, wondering who had spoken. Then the voice said again, "If you are thirsty, come and drink," and of course she remembered what Scrubb had said about animals talking in that other world, and realized that it was the lion speaking. Anyway, she had seen its lips move this time, and the voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way.

3. "Are you not thirsty?" said the lion.

4. "I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

5. "Then drink," said the lion.

6. "May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

7. The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

8. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

9. "Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

10. "I make no promise," said the Lion.

11. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

12. "Do you eat girls?" she said.

13. "I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

14. "I daren't come and drink," said Jill.

15. "Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

16. "Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

17. "There is no other stream," said the Lion.

18. It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion – no one who had seen his stern face could do that – and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted. You didn't need to drink much of it, for it quenched your thirst at once.

F. "That's the holy God who is. He makes no promises to be tame. He is dangerous, and he is the only water there is.

G. But he provides water freely to those who turn to him.

H. Jesus said, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink' (John 7:37). There is no other stream."

VI. We are going to close by singing~~,~~ **"**Holy, Holy, Holy,**"** which:

A. Was written in the early 1800s by an Anglican pastor in rural England. It's drawn from the two places in Scripture where heaven sings "Holy, holy, holy":

1. Isaiah 6 – where the seraphim are saying it. And Revelation 4:8, where the Cherubim are saying it. Both get noted in the passage as falling down before him and "casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea."

B. It also has a verse that sounds like Isaiah's "Woe is me": "Though the darkness hide thee, though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see; only thou art holy; there is none beside thee."

C. Sing it as your confession. And sing the last verse as Isaiah's "Here am I."

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VII. Benediction:

A. So, what does the holiness of God mean for you? Well, if you are anxious: Identify the situation you are treating as though God has vacated his throne. Bring that particular fear to him.

B. If you are a bit self-righteous: Before diagnosing someone else's failures, confess one specific sin of your own without explanation or excuse.

C. If you are ashamed: Take God's declaration of forgiveness more seriously than your continuing feelings of unworthiness.

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[1] Lewis's actual wording is: "How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important." Your "second most important thing" is a paraphrase. C.S. Lewis Institute.

[2] In Psalm 115:8: we become like what we worship.

[3] 2 Chron. 26:16–21

[4] In *The Holiness of God,* R. C. Sproul notes that in the Hebrew, you use repetition for emphasis. There are few adjectives. If something is very true, you say, "truly, truly." He looks at Genesis 14:10, which talks about kings falling into pits. And this passage is translated in all kinds of ways. The NIV and NASB say "tar pits." The NKJV says "asphalt pits." The KJV says "slime pits." And the RSV and ESV say "bitumen pits." This is because the Hebrew says: pit, pit.

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