



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
November 4, 2018 Sermon

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## Here We Are: Joining the Heavenly Chorus

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8, Jeremiah 9:3-9, Psalm 97 (selected verses), Psalm 16:5-11

This passage [Isaiah 6:1-8] was extremely significant to ancient readers . . . What Isaiah seems to be describing is nothing less than his transformation into a prophet—how an ordinary man was made fit to answer the call and carry God’s word. . . . Isaiah, when he realizes he is in the presence of God Himself, thinks he is doomed because he is “of impure lips.” But there is no such concept as “impure lips” in biblical law. Interpreters have thus long debated precisely what he meant . . .

Another question that came up was: why were the seraphim saying “holy” to one another? (“And one would call to another and say, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts.’”) Oughtn’t they to be directing their words to God? . . . When ancient Jews sought to praise God in their prayers, they naturally saw themselves as the earthly equivalent of the angels serving and praising God on high.—James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*

Prefaces to the Scripture Lessons:

The Bible is a book (yes, I offer regularly such profundities), comprising many books. But it is also a conversation, or rather a whole series of ongoing conversations. First between the authors themselves, as later ones quote and interpret earlier ones, but also between readers through the centuries, including ourselves, but also, ultimately and truly, between us and God.

Our primary Scripture Lesson today—Isaiah chapter 6 verses 1-8—will be sung by the Westminster Choir in the anthem, “In the Year King Uzziah Died.” All I will do is put three other Scripture passages in conversation with that one to (I hope) illuminate it.

In the Isaiah passage, when Isaiah realizes he is not only in the temple of God, but in the very presence of God, he thinks he is doomed because he is “a man of unclean lips who dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”

Now this is weird. If you look in the books of the Old Testament devoted to the law, and all the passages related to ritual purity and impurity, cleanliness and uncleanliness, you find lots and lots of ways that a person can become unclean—from touching a corpse to touching someone who has touched a corpse to accidentally stepping on a dead mouse or lizard—and thus require ritual purification before entering into the temple. But in all those many ways, unclean lips are never mentioned. But if you go beyond the books of the law to the books of the prophets—specifically Jeremiah 9:3-9—you do find something about unclean lips: “They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongues to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the Lord.”

In the Isaiah passage, the seraphim (seraphim are a kind of angel, the word in Hebrew literally means “burners,” or “burning ones”—as the stars and planets, meteors and comets, burn in the night sky) cry out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” But this

is by no means the only passage in the Bible that speaks not only of heaven but of the whole earth being full of God's glory. Psalm 97 strikes the same note: "The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; the heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory. For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth."

One more question about the Isaiah passage: Why is it that the angels say "Holy, Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts" to one another and not directly to God? (See Kugel quotation above.) Psalm 16 provides an answer to this question (which I'll return to in the sermon): "You, Lord, show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

## **Sermon**

We human beings use language to communicate.

Yeah, right!

We human beings use language to prevaricate, obfuscate, equivocate, fabricate, dissimulate, manipulate, over-complicate, lacerate, decimate, debilitate, vituperate, castigate, dominate, discomobulate, denigrate, calumniate, deprecate, and annihilate .

And just think of the words that rhyme with "lie," starting with falsify, vilify, and terrify.

My saying all this really has nothing to do with next Tuesday being the first Tuesday in November; really it's our fallen and sinful human condition, although the lead-up to this Election Day has provided a particularly depressing confirmation of it, as if it needed confirming.

Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips.

It is difficult—most difficult—to know and speak the truth, especially to speak the truth in love, (as Paul puts it) in a relationship, a community, a society, a people that is characterized by dishonesty.

They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil.

Lies multiply—exponentially—in retaliation, in imitation, in self-defense, simply from their own vicious downward momentum, as a matter of course. And so people speak the truth at their own peril. Even people with every intention of being honest, who love the truth and value integrity, find the prospect of speaking the truth daunting.

Words lose their value, their currency, their meaning. If people flooded our markets with actual false currency—counterfeit tens, twenties, and hundreds, or more tellingly, with false credit card and bank numbers—so that buying and selling became fraught with difficulty and risk, so that even well-intentioned, honest people found it well-nigh impossible to do business, we would be outraged.

And yet we accept it with barely a shrug when it comes to the currency of our language, and not just in our political discourse but in all other areas as well.

They commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit!

What we need, I sometimes think, is an angel, one of God's holy burners, coming towards us with a burning coal in his hand, to touch to our lips, to purify us. But then another part of me says: Be careful what you wish for. God will come like a refiner's fire.

Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord; and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this?

And the worst punishment, the most awful retribution, would be for God to allow us to go right on in our dishonest ways. A darkened, diseased and forever dying soul is its own worst punishment, both individually and collectively, They refuse to know me, says the Lord. That's the worst punishment of all, and it is self-inflicted.

We human beings use language to communicate.

And that's right.

We human beings use language to cooperate, collaborate, illuminate, elucidate, educate, celebrate, alleviate, invigorate, congratulate, integrate, cultivate, stimulate, animate, activate, elevate, deliberate, create, and venerate.

And just think of all the words that rhyme with "glorify," starting with unify, justify, and sanctify.

My saying all this has really has nothing to do with this being Stewardship Sunday; really it's our redeemed and rightly restored human condition, although Stewardship Sunday provides a particularly joyful confirmation of it, and sometimes, given the state of language in our fallen world, it does need confirming.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices.

It is easy—or at least a lot easier—to know and speak the truth, especially to speak the truth about God, Holy, Holy, Holy (as the angels put it), in a relationship, a community, a society, a people that is characterized by worshipping God.

The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!  
The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.

Truth—and the joy and gladness that truth brings—multiplies, multiplies exponentially when it is shared. This is why the angels say what they say—"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!"—to one another and not directly to God: Because they need to hear it from one another to make their joy complete.

Have you ever noticed that no joy, no pleasure, is complete until it is shared? When we see something beautiful, hear a wonderful work of music, enjoy a great meal, witness a great play or game—we want to share it, tell somebody about it, even to write a poem or sing a song about it. "Did you see that?" "Did you hear that?" "Did you try that?" "Do you believe that?"

"Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart."

I might have quoted that line to myself—or read it for myself in Psalm 16—when I woke up this morning. But when the choir shares it with me here this morning, shares it with us, the sheer joy, the sheer pleasure of it, is exponentially greater. No joy, no pleasure, is complete until it is shared.

That sharing is God's burning fire, purifying our lips.

And so the currency of our language is purified, restored; not just in our worship, but in all other areas as well—even in our political discourse. Let's at least say that it's not impossible for it to be restored in our political discourse.

And in truth, there are many people, including many elected and appointed officials, many running for office, many, many government employees, and many in the media, who are bravely trying to speak the truth, speak the truth in love even, in a difficult environment fraught with risk. They deserve our admiration and our gratitude. They too bring the burning coal to our lips.

And it's not just in our political and public lives. In all of our lives, in all our relationships—friends and family—work, prayer and play—to God one another and to ourselves—our language is purified, restored, and redeemed. We can—and do—speak the truth in love.

You show us the path of your life. In your presence is fullness of life; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

And that is why we come forward with our pledges and offerings on Stewardship Sunday. To complete our joy. To say to God and to another: "Here I am, Lord—here we are—ready to join in the heavenly chorus; send us one of your angels, one of your holy burners—send us your purifying fire. So that we may know and speak the truth in love truth. We come forward on Stewardship to say this through burning lips:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.