

THE HOLINESS OF GOD
First in a Lenten Series: "The Holiness of God"
First Sunday in Lent –February 22, 2015 –Revelation 4: 1-11
The Church of the Covenant

I was made the executive pastor in the first church I served up in Michigan and decided that I had better finally take a full walk-through of the building; this was no small building with some 80 Sunday School Classrooms; bathrooms between every two classrooms with teeny-tiny toilets for the smallest children that then graduated upward. There was the chapel and there was the youth chapel and on the architect's diagram there was a children's chapel that I had never been in. It was off the staff lunch room. So I obtained the key and opened the double doors. It was a sea of old choir robes. It was the place old choir robes go to die. Blue and green and red and maroon ones; every shape and size. I waded my way through the sea of robes up to the chancel area of the children's chapel and there discovered a perfect scale model of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant. I was a Raider of the Lost Ark (to coin a phrase from an Indiana Jones movie); the Ark having been lost many millennia ago. Who would have suspected it was there all along in the children's chapel of the Presbyterian Church?

In Lent this year I want us to be Raiders of the Lost Ark; I want us to seek the holiness of God; I want us to rediscover a concept largely lost like the lost Ark over time. Holiness –what does it mean? How is God holy? How are we not Holy? And the question I will pose over and over again in Lent this year – **How do we as sinful, unholy people dare to stand in the presence of a Holy, Holy, Holy thrice holy God?** When we die and go to stand in the presence of a Holy God how do we do that? If we were called home today are we prepared to stand in His HOLY presence? Consider that the spiritual pilgrimage this Lent is for us as the Prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 35: 8-10 to tread "*the highway of holiness*". We are to walk the way the Lord has set forth for us; we are to journey to Jerusalem, Zion the Holy City of our God and there experience HOLY Week and Easter. We cannot walk the highway of holiness without seeking to understand the holiness of God.

Our scripture for today from the last book of the New Testament, Revelation 4: 1-11, is a scene of entering into the holiness of God. It is a scene of God's heavenly throne room; we catch a glimpse of what it will be like one day. I say "like" because where the holiness of God is concerned we run out of words; we use similes and metaphors; we are completely unable to describe something which is beyond our knowledge and ability to describe. Note, please, that it is God who reveals Himself, "*a door is opened in heaven*" to the writer; that is the only way he can enter into the presence of a Holy God –God Himself must open the door; God Himself must reveal Himself to us. The author of Revelation sees a scene of heavenly worship and they are saying, "*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*" (Revelation 4: 8) Three holies are used here. In the Bible any time something is emphasized three times it means that it is PERFECT, COMPLETE and whole unto itself. Holy, Holy, Holy means that God is perfectly HOLY. Holy means set apart. It means "Not like anything else". Holy means it is separate from anything else on this earth. Rudolph Otto in his book "*The Idea of the Holy*" notes that this means that God is "wholly other"; the "otherness of God" is God's principle attribute and essence. All that God is is HOLY. His being itself IS holiness. God WAS HOLY; God IS HOLY; God is to come and when He comes HE IS HOLY. And the 24 elders who are around the throne bow down and worship God in His holiness, and they "*cast their crowns*" before Him (Revelation 4: 10), meaning, they throw their own power down at the foot of the Holy God, because, "*Thou (alone) art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power.*" (v. 11) To enter into God's presence is to discover a HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, thrice holy, perfectly holy God. HOLY, HOLY, HOLY God, who was, and is, and is to come...Thou alone art worthy to receive glory and honor and power and our praise...for Thou alone art HOLY!!!!!!!

First, God is HOLY. *“My ways are not your ways”, says the Holy God. Don’t try to tread the pathway, the way you want to walk on your own, for you will never find me. There is a highway of holiness I have set before you and those who walk it will find me and those who do not, will not. I chasten whom I love. I chastened my own Son Jesus for mighty purposes far beyond your understanding. For I am Holy. I giveth and I taketh. Blessed be my holy name. My reasons are inscrutable and unknown, part of a Sovereign HOLY plan established before the foundations of the earth. For I am the Holy, Holy, Holy God. Your will, humanity, is not my will. Your plans are not my plans. Your ideas, humanity, are not my ideas. You pray to me but then you do not want my answer. You want to hear my voice but then when I speak you stop up your ears. For I am set apart; I am separate from your world; I am HOLY, says the Lord God.* It is interesting to me that agnostics and atheists often critique the belief in God by saying that all God is is an anthropomorphic rendering of the best of humanity. God is just the best attributes of humanity projected up on an idea about God. God is good and God is love because those are the best attributes of humanity. Holiness is the answer to the agnostic. A HOLY God answers an atheist this way –only if you have a failed view of God would you ever suggest that God is just a representation of the best attributes of humanity. No, God is set apart, unlike anything in this world. Humanity tries to describe God but these are at best images that really do not convey the totality of whom God is. *Anything Good in this world is a reflection of my holiness, says the Lord. You love, because I loved you first, says Jesus. Your knowledge is falsehood unless it comes from me, says the Lord.*

Second, God is HOLY, HOLY. In listings by secular people of the attributes of Jesus or of God invariably they will list “Tolerance” on their laundry list as an attribute of God. Unfortunately, however, God is not tolerant of unholiness. God does not tolerate those things we do and say and think that are filled with our fallen sinful nature. Our lack of holiness is utterly incompatible with God’s holiness. The two cannot be in the same room at the same time. Think about it this way. If we were to enter into an entirely dark room with no light in it whatsoever, that would be a representation of our own fallen humanity. But turn on the light switch for the smallest, dim-est bulb, the light being a representation of God’s holiness, and suddenly the room is filled with light. Light and darkness are utterly incompatible. The one casts the other out completely. Darkness cannot stand in the presence of the glory, light and perfect holiness of God. *“Faith, hope, love abide, these three”,* as the Bible says, because when the fire of God’s holiness comes in the end of days, it will burn all the dross away and only the pure gold of God’s holiness in our lives will prevail and live and abide forever. Think of it this way. Remember the scene in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” when the Nazis have stolen the Ark of the Covenant and they take off the top and invoke the Holy names of God? The holiness of God comes first as a beautiful angel but then as an avenging angel, the flesh of the Nazis literally melt from their bones. Our sinful nature in the presence of the Holy, Holy, Holy God is like that. It cannot stand in the presence of a Holy God. The two realities are utterly incompatible. *“It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a holy God.”,* says scripture. How can we as sinful, unholy people stand in the presence of a Holy, Holy, Holy God?

Third, God is HOLY, HOLY, HOLY. A holy God sets forth a highway of holiness upon which we must walk in order to find Him and in order to stand in His Holy presence. God sets how we enter His presence; we do not. Anyone who missed Chris Pachter’s class on Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism “through Christian eyes” really missed something. In the class on Hinduism one of Chris’ conclusions was that Hinduism stresses how there are many pathways to God. There are thousands of gods and a person can assemble those gods whom the person wishes to, in order to meet their own personal needs. Many gods and many pathways to God. (You know, I think if we were to take a poll of Americans that more people on this issue would be functionally Hindus rather than Christians). But not the God of Abraham, Jacob and Israel; not the God of Jesus and Paul. *“The Lord our God is ONE”,* not many, says the scripture. The Lord our God is HOLY, declares His Word. *“The gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and*

those who find it are few”, says Jesus. (Matthew 7: 14) Place your feet on the highway of holiness and march to Jerusalem and HOLY week with me. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”, says Jesus. (John 14; 6,7) Place your feet upon the HOLY way of the Lord Jesus, and there you will find the truth and there you will find the life, because no one comes to the Father but by Him. No one enters the presence of the Holy, Holy, Holy, thrice holy, perfectly HOLY God except through Jesus.

Now I realize that I have probably created much consternation and many unresolved issues and questions today. Good, I am making us think. I cannot cover a vast subject like the holiness of God in just one sermon on just one Sunday. So you will just have to come back *every* Sunday in Lent to walk the holy highway to Holy Week and Easter with me! Tune in next week. And Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*