

Sermon Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

Sermon Title: "Unclean Lips"

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Our text for the Fifth Lord's Day after the Epiphany is taken from the book of Isaiah, where he says: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

This is our text.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, how do you think that you would react if Jesus suddenly appeared in all His glory right here in this very room this morning? Would you be frightened or happy? Maybe you would feel a certain sense of vindication, thinking, "Well, that shows all those foolish unbelievers, doesn't it? I guess we know where they'll end up, don't we?" You might even be thinking: "Well, it's certainly about time, Lord! We've been praying 'Thy kingdom come' for centuries! What took you so long?"

But in the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, we get a better idea of what might really happen, don't we? In chapter six of Isaiah, we see and hear that God is calling Isaiah to be a prophet to the Israelites and specifically to the southern kingdom of Judah. During the lifetime of Isaiah, he would see the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel and would see Judah experience its last "golden age" when Uzziah and Jotham reestablished Judah's borders to the time of King David and King Solomon. As a matter of fact, we see in our text that Isaiah's vision in chapter six begins with the death of King Uzziah. History also records that Rome was probably founded at this same time. Isaiah would witness Judah at the height of its power.

But he would also witness the kings wavering between Ahaz, who would close the temple and fall into sin and unbelief; and the reforms of Hezekiah, who would reopen the temple and bring about religious renewal and revival for his people. The book of Isaiah spans for more than a half of a century. His writings are quoted by more New Testament authors than any other prophet in the Old Testament. As we approach the Lenten season, we will be examining chapter 53 of Isaiah, perhaps one of his most famous chapters talking about the "suffering Servant". Isaiah can probably be considered the greatest prophet in the Old Testament next to Moses and Elijah.

And yet, Isaiah sees the Lord in all His glory, and all that he can say is: "Oy weh ist mir!" "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips." Isaiah isn't thinking about how great it is that the Lord has called him to be a prophet. He isn't thinking about how worthy he is to be standing in front of the Lord upon the throne. In fact, he's thinking the exact opposite. He realizes his sinful state—his unclean lips—and knows that he's a dead man because he's standing in front of the perfect, sinless, holy and almighty Lord of hosts.

Ever since Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation to the serpent in the Garden of Eden, mankind has hidden from God. When they heard God calling in the garden, Adam tells the Lord our God:

"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

Mankind has hidden itself from God ever since then, hasn't it? As a matter of fact, when Moses asked God to show him His glory, God in His mercy tells Moses:

"... You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."

There are literally hundreds of passages in the Bible that tell us when God or one of His angels appeared to a human being, the first words that came out of their mouth were "Fear not." "Don't be afraid." Any time that sinful man has been in the presence of God's divine majesty and glory, they were *afraid* because they knew that they were naked, that they had unclean lips, eyes, ears, nose, throat, or any other part of the body that you can think of.

People are no different today, are they? We live in a world where each and every one of us could say, "I am a man, woman or child of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips!" In one moment we might be saying "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise," and in the next we might be using those same lips to yell obscenities at someone who cuts us off on the highway. We might pray with the psalmist: "My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you," but then we know very well that these same lips might be used to tell lies, pass on rumors, or spread gossip and slander to our parents, our friends, our co-workers or our spouse.

We certainly do have unclean lips, don't we? Our confirmands have learned, memorized and recited the Eighth Commandment and its meaning from Luther's Small Catechism, which says the following:

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way."

We say and learn these words, but how often are we tempted by the devil to let a secret slip through our unclean lips that a friend has entrusted us to keep? You only have to check out the tabloids and other “more legitimate” magazines at the checkout counter in a grocery store in order to see the slander, gossip and rumors that are being spread about celebrities and the beautiful people each day. And lest we think that as Christians we are immune to such things, the world tempts us to use our unclean lips to tell not only lies, but even perfectly true things as well about people—and yet a reputation can be destroyed; a life can be damaged; a job and a family can be ruined by such words.

We have unclean lips, and we are a people of unclean lips. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg, isn’t it? We have unclean lips, unclean hearts, unclean minds, unclean bodies that sin each and every day. Even if we were to try our best, to try our hardest to live holy lives in order to somehow “clean up our act” and earn God’s favor, Isaiah tells us later on in chapter sixty four:

“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”

If we try to get into heaven by our own righteousness, we will fail miserably, because we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We face a righteous and holy God with unclean lips, standing before him in filthy rags, and we can but shake and quake with fear and trembling at the sight.

But our text doesn’t stop there, does it? If it did, Isaiah would certainly have had good reason to be shaking in his boots. He would certainly have been deserving of death, just as we are. But the text continues by saying:

“Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”

I’d like to pause and ask the parents in here at Messiah a question this morning. Whether you have caught your child in a lie, or they have said a bad word that they heard on TV (or from somewhere or someone else), have you ever washed your child’s mouth out with soap? Have you ever had your own mouth washed out with soap? Does it ever really work? Don’t get me wrong. You might very well succeed in keeping your child from doing or saying such things again. Or you might try as much as possible to clean your unclean lips and tongue (or your child’s), but never completely succeed. But God *has* made Isaiah’s lips and our own lips clean. Our guilt is taken away, and our sin atoned for. God promises us that “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be made white as snow”.

How is this done? One thing is certain: we don’t have to stick a hot coal on our lips like the guy on the A-1 commercial! Instead, our lips have been washed and made clean by the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That same Jesus Christ voluntarily suffered hell and death on the cross. He took our uncleanness upon Himself so that we might not have to die eternally. Even though He prayed to His heavenly Father that this cup might pass from his lips, He nevertheless submitted to his Father’s will for your sake and mine.

People loved by God, now that your unclean lips have been made clean, what are you going to do about it? It is my hope and prayer that we not only take this Good News to heart, but also share that joyous Word to others as well. Let us now and always go forth in joy and in peace, sharing with others who have unclean lips the news that Jesus Christ can make all things new. May we all be eager to answer God’s call to be fishers of men, as the words from the hymn writer say:

“Let none hear you idly saying,
‘There is nothing I can do.’
While the multitudes are dying
And the Master calls for you.
Take the task He gives you gladly,
Let His work your pleasure be;
Answer quickly when He calleth,
‘Here am I, send, me, send me!’”

May God grant this for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

And now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Amen.