**Sermon Epiphany 5C**

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**Text:** *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3)*

There are three rules for reading the Old Testament. They are the same rules which apply to real estate: location, location, location. Our setting in Isaiah chapter six is the Temple in Jerusalem, the primary location for worship of the true God. The Lord specifically chose this Temple for His dwelling in Deuteronomy chapter twelve: “You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree … You shall not worship the Lordy your God in that way. But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Deut 12:2-6). During an epoch where the people of Israel and Judea departed from this command of the Lord, when they were worshipping every kind of god in every kind of place, Isaiah fitly encounters the Lord in His holy temple: “I saw the Lord… and the train of his robe filled the temple.” (Is 6:1)

Furthermore, God does not organize the place and manner of worship haphazardly. In the usual order of things, He assigned degrees of proximity to His holy presence. The Tabernacle, upon which the Temple in Jerusalem was patterned, consisted of various spaces: the outer court, the court of women and children, the court of men, and the tent reserved for the priests and Levites. At the focal point of it all was the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark of the Covenant – the throne of God – a room perpetually hidden from sight by a curtain. This physical arrangement of the worship space was to accentuate “a strong sense of hierarchy and a consequent appreciation that it is important for each part of the created order to know its place.” Lutheran churches typically follow this same awareness of space: the “sanctuary” (which actually begins at the Communion rail) houses the altar, where God presents Himself though Holy Communion. Although we are meant to see the altar in plain sight, the very term “holy” conveys separateness. The Communion elements are set apart for a special purpose: to house the life-giving body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This scheme is not, however, set up with our own holiness and worthiness in mind. Quite the opposite. God designed worship in order to communicate His holiness to people who were not holy to begin with. It has been said with a rhetorical flair that “the Church is not a sanctuary for saints but a hospital for sinners.” That saying is a spin on our Lord Jesus’ words, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:17) A careful editor should put quotation marks around that word “righteous”; the subtext behind Jesus’ words is, of course, that no one is righteous. Everyone has need of the Great Physician of souls. We mortal beings are not holy in ourselves any more than we generate our own health and growth. Each of us depends on regular nourishment, physical exercise, water, sleep, and the continual drawing of breath. As the Australian Lutheran theologian John W. Kleinig points out in his book *Grace Upon Grace*, we “breathe” in the Holy Spirit. None of us “possesses” Him or His gifts; no human being aside from our Lord Jesus is intrinsically holy.

Like Isaiah, a priest who found himself ministering in the Temple, we find ourselves continually returning to the Fountain and Source of all goodness where He wants to be found. We depend on the sacramental ministry of the Church, which is packaged and delivered to us in an orderly way.

The world finds this arrangement counterintuitive. Common wisdom, purveyed by sages and gurus, would have a Spirit that flows freely. Unpredictably. Spontaneously, some might say; how could a spirit bind Himself to physical materials or designated spaces? Did not Jesus Himself say to Nicodemus that the “*pneuma*, spirit blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8)? Isn’t it superstition to believe that objects can manipulate spirits? All valid points – but, if we take our Lord’s words seriously, the Spirit can manipulate and imbue with life-giving power whatever objects He wills. He used the body of the Ever-Virgin Mary to conceive the Lord of heaven and earth. Today, He “works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel” through the Word and Sacraments (AC V 2).

Not even Isaiah encountered God is what we might consider a wholly “spiritual” manner. We are told that the train of the Lord’s robe “filled the temple”; and we are told the voices of the angelic seraphim, as they shouted the Lord’s praises “Holy, holy, holy,” shook the foundations of the temple (Is 6:2-4). When Isaiah laments that he is “a man of unclean lips” who dwells “in the midst of a people of unclean lips,” a seraph does something startling. He takes an earthly tool – a pair of tongs! – and lifts 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.” (vv. 5-7) Not an impressive spiritual uplifting. God uses the stuff of the Temple to cleanse Isaiah’s conscience; and He uses the down and dirty stuff of this earth to deliver the medicine we need to cure our terminal disease of sin. This is where holiness comes in. Certain things are set apart: I have mentioned the host and wine that do not symbolize but are the body and blood of Christ; by way of the Baptismal water, we are first cleansed of all sin past, present, and future.

Where are these things “set apart”? In no other place than the holy Christian Church. In explaining the Third Article of the Creed, Luther’s Large Catechism expounds on the work of the Holy Spirit: “Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through (sacraments) appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian church, where there is full forgiveness of sin.” Does this mean we are free to do as we please, simply because God does as He pleases? No. We are still His creatures “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:9-10) The most important work He has for us to do is this: as Bl. Dr. Luther concludes, “God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another.” (LC II 55) By that same token, those who have no remorse for their sins, those who reject God’s forgiveness by refusing to extend it to others, shut out the way for the Spirit to perform His life-giving work.

Is it absolutely necessary to “go to Church,” that is, darken the door of a church building? Not for those who are unable to do so – I mean our isolated members due to disease or decline. But for those who can attend Divine Service, consider. In the time of Isaiah, even down to the time of Jesus’ earthly life, there was one place only where worship of God happened: Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Today we have public worship in accessible locations. Wherever a baptized believer breathes in the Word of God by way of reading Scripture or receiving the gifts of ministry, there the Spirit is at work setting us apart as holy. His. There is only one place God will not enter: a hardened heart. I’ll never forget when, in Catholic elementary school, our teacher once paused class to share something. She said that, by holding on to anger, we build a fence around our hearts. That fence gets higher so that no one gets past. Even God. Make of that image what you will. The fact remains that we need never be uncertain about where or how to meet our Saviour. The Church is “in the world,” our Lord assures us: “but take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)