

## Isaiah 6:1-8

A famous poster from 1919 shows a group of women, all of them stern-faced, holding up a sign that reads: "Lips that touch liquor shall not touch ours!" Prohibition became the law of the land the following year, so apparently the poster worked. Although judging from the looks of these women, I can't imagine how that was possible. I wonder if these same women would have held their sign up to Jesus. His lips did indeed touch liquor. Not scotch or brandy, but wine.

It's not what enters the lips, or the mouth as Jesus puts it in Matthew 15, that defiles a person and renders his lips unclean; but what comes out of them. Isaiah, in his vision, is very aware of the fact that his lips are not clean. "*Woe is me!*" he cries, "*For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips!*" Was he a liar? A gossip? A slanderer? No, Isaiah was a man of God; a man of faith. Yet in desperation he cries out, "*Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips!*"

How are your lips this morning? How have you been using them lately? Today you are using your lips to praise God. Like the Seraphim, you cried out: "*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!*" You have used your lips to confess your sins, and to confess the Christian Faith with the words of the creed. You have used your lips to offer prayer and supplication to God. You are like Isaiah--men, women, and children of God; people of faith. It shows in how you use your lips. And yet Isaiah does not cry, "Look at my lips, Lord. Notice how clean they are, for I am using them to pray, praise, and give thanks." No, just the opposite. "*Woe is me!*" he cries, "*for my lips are unclean!*"

When we compare our lips to the lips of others, we may think that our lips, along with our mind, heart, and hands are pretty clean. But when we enter the presence of the holy God, our uncleanness is exposed. Isaiah cries out in desperation not when he is out in the marketplace with others, but when he is in the temple of the majestic God, hearing God's praises from the holy lips of the Seraphim.

When we enter God's House on Sunday, there should be a certain awe to it. There is a sacredness to this place. It is unlike every other house or building you enter the other six days of the week. When we gather here to worship, we are like Isaiah in the presence of the holy God. Our eyes do not see Him as Isaiah did in his vision. We, therefore, must see by faith. See the Lord uplifted here in His temple. See the train of His robe filling this place. See the Seraphim covering their faces and their feet out of respect, and hear them praising God. See the smoke filling this house. Feel the thresholds trembling. When you enter God's House by faith in this way, you like Isaiah, will lower your knee and bow your head and cry, "Woe is me! For I have unclean lips!"

When the holy God speaks from His word of Law, we are reminded of all the wickedness that has come out of our lips--lies, gossip, slander, curse words, foul words, hateful words. We dare not compare our lips to the lips of others, nor compare the bad that comes out of our lips with the good. "*Who can bring that which is clean out of the unclean?*" asks Job. "*No one!*" No wonder Isaiah cries out. How can he be God's prophet and speak the good word to those around him when his lips are unclean? So also with us. Unclean lips give rise to unclean words. How can we dare to open our lips to praise the holy God, when out of the same lips last week came filthy talk, hateful words, lies, and gossip!

Here's how. As we bow our head with Isaiah, and cry out in sorrowful repentance, God does not reject us or our lips; He forgives. What a glorious moment in his vision when one of the Seraphim took a burning coal from the altar, flew to Isaiah with the coal and touched his lips with it, and said: "*Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.*"

That same burning coal is here today. Just as it was on the altar in Isaiah's vision, so it's on the altar today. As God's angel, His messenger, took the burning coal from the altar and brought it to the lips of Isaiah, so God's messenger today will take that coal--the body and blood of Christ--from the altar and bring it to your lips this morning, and your guilt, also, is taken away; your sin, also, is atoned for.

We may wonder why God had His angel do that. Isaiah had ears. Why not just tell him that his lips are made clean, that his sin is forgiven? Why touch a burning coal to his lips? But then we may also wonder why we need the Sacrament of our Lord's body and blood. We hear with our ears the word of forgiveness; why also come to the altar to receive on our lips, and in our mouth, Jesus' flesh and blood?

I burned my arm on a hot skillet last week. The burn mark is still there. It doesn't hurt anymore. It's now just a red mark on my forearm. Whenever I see it, which is several times each day, I am reminded how it got there. The Sacrament is such a burn mark for us.

Yes, Jesus comes into your ears with His word of forgiveness; and His word is true, it is sincere, it is for all to hear. And that very word is given to Isaiah: "*Your guilt is taken away; your sin atoned for.*" But it was not a naked word. It was connected to the burning coal. "*Behold,*" said the Seraphim, "*this (coal) has touched your lips,* and because of this, the Seraphim then says, "*Your sin is forgiven.*"

The word of forgiveness to you is not a naked word. It is the word that is connected to the cross of your Lord. Apart from that cross, there is no forgiveness. No guilt is taken away unless that guilt is borne and carried by Christ the Crucified. And it was. Your guilt and mine, the sins of your lips and mine, the transgressions of your heart and mine were all given to Jesus. And He took them all. He bore the guilt. He accepted the punishment. He paid the price. This is why the word of forgiveness is for you. Christ died for you. He hung on the cross for each one of you.

But where is the cross? It's not on Calvary anymore. Friend, the cross of your Lord is here on the altar. Not the one standing up straight and tall; the one sitting in bread and wine. Here in the Lord's Supper is the cross of Christ. "*As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup,*" the apostle says, "*you proclaim the Lord's death.*" Jesus endured the burning coals of hell for you. The burn marks are here in the bread and wine. You cannot see Jesus with your eyes. But you see bread and wine. And because this bread is His body, and this wine is His blood, this Supper is the burning coal made hot in the fires of hell, and given to you for the forgiveness of your sins. This Sacrament which touches your lips is the red burn mark that is a beautiful reminder to you that the word of forgiveness spoken here to all, is truly for you.

So Isaiah was forgiven. His lips were made clean. God does not then command him, He asks, "*Whom shall I send?*" And Isaiah responds, "*Here am I! Send me.*" Dear Christian, your lips, your heart, your life are also made clean. The good word of Christ can now be spoken by lips--your lips--which have touched the flesh and blood of your Lord. "*Whom shall I send?*" God continues to ask today. This is no law, no burden. This is who you now are--one whose lips speak the good word to others.

Your lips do not have to speak of God's grace, of the cross of Christ, but they will, because your lips are now the lips of Jesus. He who lives in you, who died and lives for you, who touches your lips with His to cleanse you--He is making your lips into burning coals; coals which touch the lives of others, which bring to them the same grace and mercy that is yours in Christ. "*Whom shall (God) send?*" "Here am I! Send me! Send me!" Amen.