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Ardmore, Pennsylvania  
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 10, 2018

Lectionary Year C:  
Isaiah 6:1-13  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
Luke 5:1-11  
Psalm 138

*Heavenly grace*

What does heaven look like? I don't know. I've never been there. In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Shoeless Joe Jackson asks Kevin Costner, "Is this heaven?" "No," he replies. "This is Iowa." But I've never been to Iowa, either.

Theologians remind us that heaven isn't a place, the way that, say, Iowa is a place (supposedly). You can drive, or fly, to Iowa, if you want, but not even the most impressive rocket ship can get you to heaven. It's not a place you can travel to. Instead, in the Biblical imagination, it's just where God makes his home. It's a created place where the creator of all things has decided to be.

There are a few fragmentary references to heaven, or something like it, in the Bible, if you're interested. The most elaborate is the description of the coming of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. The New Jerusalem, a new city of peace, comes down to earth at the time of the resurrection of the dead.

Then there's a description in the book of Isaiah, not dissimilar, which we heard earlier (6:1-13). There is a throne; there are angels—weird looking angels, with wings covering their faces and wings covering their feet, but angels anyway—there is incense and smoke. And there is singing. Isaiah reports that these strange angels call out to one another, *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, adonai tseva'ot*: holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.

You may recognize this from our own services of worship. At the beginning of our Eucharistic prayer we say something like, "Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with angels and archangels [even the really weird angels], to sing this hymn to the glory of your Name: *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, adonai saboath*." Holy, holy, holy: that angelic song is going on in heaven right now (whatever and wherever heaven is) and at each worship service we sing right along with them.

Whatever and wherever heaven is, it is full of God's glory. God's presence is a glorious presence, and if God is present in heaven, then—as both Isaiah and Revelation show—it will be full of glory. But "heaven and earth are full of your glory," which we say or sing, isn't actually what the seraphs in Isaiah say. They just say, "the whole *earth* is full of his glory." The angels, for their part, don't say anything about heaven. Their praise is of God's glory on earth.

This is instructive even if maybe a little bit confusing. On the one hand, this commissioning scene in Isaiah is about what happens far above, in places inaccessible. On the other hand, the Lord has made it such that his glory is present even on earth. Perhaps the seraphs are a little surprised—his glory is there *even on earth!* And that place needs it, you can imagine them saying. It seems impossible, you can imagine them saying, but sure enough the earth is full of his glory.

That balance of the celestial and the terrestrial is foregrounded at the beginning of Isaiah's vision. Isaiah sees the Lord on a throne, "high and lofty," surrounded by angels, in the heavenly

places. But then Isaiah describes the way that the hem of God's robe filled the temple. While residing in heaven, God is nonetheless also present below, even if only partially, even if only somewhat obscurely. So that even in this passage—one of the Bible's most explicitly otherworldly descriptions—the Lord remains anchored in the world. He doesn't stay hermetically sealed in the safe confines of heaven. In this revelation, God is seen as one whose presence is also manifested here on earth.

From this idea it is only a step to thinking of God himself dwelling not only in the temple (with the hem of his robe), but in the world at large. It's only a step at that point to see how the God who wants to be with his people would do so in person, so to speak, not only from a distance, and not only through an emissary. It's only a step but, of course, it's the most important step: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," and the whole earth was full of his glory. Jesus of Nazareth, God himself: the whole earth is full of his glory. His arms embrace the world. His heart beats with heartbeat of the world. It is full of his glory.

To be sure, it can be hard to square a description of the world as full of God's glory with the actual world in which we live, which we sometimes do perceive as glorious, to be sure; and other times as wretched; and most of the time in between. It may seem strange to imagine this to be true, all the glory. We may think that those singing seraphim need glasses.

But the scripture that we read, along with the hymns that we sing, and the prayers that we pray, and the worship that we perform, and the service that we offer, and the lessons that we teach, these are all undergirded by a divine promise: the promise that someday the glory that is hidden now will be fully revealed, and that some day we will participate in the glory of God. That's the promise. That, one day, God's glory will reign on earth: uncontested, unmitigated, undefeatable. He promises.

Promises are made in the present, but they're only kept in the future, and the thing about the future is that it hasn't happened yet. The Bible itself isn't blind to the fact that the obvious present does not match up to this promised future, neither does it downplay the distance between the two. Instead, we see how the Bible recognizes that participation in God's glory requires the purification of the participant—of all the participants.

So, for example, Isaiah recognizes it when he is called to speak: "Woe is me," he cries out, "I am a man of unclean lips." But all is not lost: the coal touches his lips and makes him ready to reflect God's glory. St. Peter the disciple recognizes it in today's gospel, when he realizes that the person there with them is not just a great teacher or a holy leader, but something far greater. His first impulse—and I think it is a correct one—is for him to fall down at Jesus' knees, Jesus' feet and say, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" When he realizes that he is encountering God's glory, in Christ, he also realizes that he is unequal to the task of participating in the divine life. He's not up to it, as Isaiah had insisted that he was not up to it: "I am a sinful man"; "I am a man of unclean lips." And Peter was restored the way Isaiah was restored: by being made worthy by the initiative of God.

St. Paul makes the same point in the reading from the epistle to the Corinthians, about himself. He is unfit to even be called an apostle, he says, but he has been made one nonetheless through the only means that such a thing could happen: through the power of grace. For Paul, for Isaiah, for Peter, they are brought into the household of God's glory by the generosity of the savior. They are saved by grace, amazing grace, that saved a wretch like them.

And that, I bet, is why the seraphim sing their song. The glory of God is the grace of God, and grace is an earthly thing. It's not needed in heaven, but only here, even in Iowa. Maybe the seraphim can see that grace at work. Maybe from their vantage point they observe how forgiveness saves people, how it changes lives. Maybe they watch people's joy in discovering that no sins are unforgivable, that God's grace restores all things to holiness. Maybe they see how God's promises

are kept in our lives. In your life. They know that God gives us the victory in Christ (1 Cor. 15:57); that it is assured through his grace.

*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh.* Holy, holy, holy.

Somewhere in heaven today the angels are singing of God's grace: his glory on earth.