

“Until cities lie waste...” Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”**

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” 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.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What a joy to meditate upon one of the most beautiful books in the Bible. The book of Isaiah the prophet. It is saturated with God’s hope-filled promises. By the way, we refer to this book and our today’s reading every time when we sing: “Holy, holy, holy!” When do we sing it? Yes, before the Lord’s Supper.

Why do we sing this particular phrase? Because we, similarly as Isaiah, we are in God’s temple, we are in the Divine Service, where the holy God Himself is present, and where we are indeed in His very presence, where He cleanses and purifies us, and where we hear His voice speaking to us.

We are change, restored, renewed, filled with the Holy Spirit. Remember the many blessings that we list on the screen during the Lord’s Supper, they all are given to you here. Undeservedly, sure! Abundantly, yes! Given to you, to each one of you.

This is where we relive the same blessed experience as Isaiah did. But then comes the question, the invitation: “Who shall we send, who will go for us?” Please, notice! That is an invitation, not a command, not a deal.

“I did this for you, now you do this for me!” No, it is a gentle invitation. A question that our Lord asks to those whom He has rescued from sin and death, paying the ultimate price, sacrificing Himself. “Who would like to go for us?”

Dear Brothers and Sisters, if we have heard this voice, the voice of our God, if we have received His abundant gifts, if the Holy Spirit has enlightened us and we begin to comprehend what and how abundantly we have received...

... we are filled with heavenly joy and overwhelming gratitude. Then we want to respond as Isaiah did: “Here I am! Send me.” Even to meditate upon these divine realities is so beautiful and good and purifying for our soul and heart-warming.

But what happens then? This is where we come to the terrifying and distressing part. This is what happened to Isaiah, this is what we witness today, it is a part and parcel of our Christian life here in this wonderful, but fallen world.

Remember, what kind of message was Isaiah sent to deliver? The most beautiful proclamation, here are just a few reminders. Isaiah Chapter 2, our Lord will gather all the nations to Himself. Chapter 7, “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and we shall call His name Immanuel.” God with us... His promise to all people!

Chapter 9, one of our Christmas readings – “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light... For to us a child is born...”. Chapter 25, the victory over death is promised. Chapter 40, “comfort, comfort my people ...”

...and the voice crying in the wilderness ... your God comes to you. Then the Suffering Servant and how He takes upon Himself our sins... then the invitation to come and buy food and drink without money and without price... the restoration of entire creation... and finally the promise of the New Heavens and New Earth.

“Holy, holy, holy...”. Incredible, magnificent, breathtaking! This is why Isaiah is often called the fifth evangelist. Because of the beauty and comfort of His message, because of the abundance of promises and hope.

But our message, it is even more beautiful, more magnificent! Isaiah only foretold; we have the message about how most of what Isaiah prophesied has been fulfilled. For us, for our benefit. And here we come to what is so terrifying.

Isaiah was sent, as are we, with this divine message, the Great News, the most joyful message. But what was and what is peoples’ reaction when they hear the message? This is how the Holy Spirit has revealed it already beforehand.

And we can safely assume that these words are really important, for Jesus Himself and the apostles quote them again and again. This is what follows after our today’s reading from Isaiah, from verse 9 till the end of that chapter. Listen carefully!

The Lord said, “Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

We are sent with the most beautiful message, with the life-giving message, but when people hear this message – what happens? Many, or should we say most, hear, but don’t understand, see, but don’t perceive.

Their hearts become duller and duller, and instead of turning to the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the source of these Great News and eternal promises, they turn against those who bring them this life-giving message.

We can only cry out: “What a mysterious and terrifying depth of our sin!” Is there anyone among us who haven’t experiences this in your own life, from those whom we love?! When we try to bring them the most beautiful Gospel of Jesus Christ, the invitation from the Triune God, and they reject it. “Not interested!”

The scary mystery of sin; how can people reject the Lord of Life! But this is not just about them... about those outside the Church. It is also about us. Where is our passion for the Lord? Where is our joy and gladness and gratitude for all His gifts and blessings? Do we heed to His gentle invitation?

Do we gladly step forward and offer ourselves, our lives to the Lord: “Here I am! Send me, send me!” Too often there seems to be this swamp of lukewarmness and indifference, and we just struggle to get out of it. That’s our daily challenge...

Thus, faithful Christians cry out to the Lord from the depth of their hearts: “How long, Lord?! When are people finally going to listen to your message? My parents, my children, my family, my dear friends? When! What should we do for that to happen?” Isaiah too asked: “How long, O Lord?” This is what the Lord answered.

“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

This is what the power of our proclamation is like. Terrifying, frightening. The Word of the Lord does not return without accomplishing its purpose. If we listen and obey, He gives us a new life, eternal life. He accomplishes His purpose.

If we reject and ignore Him, if we are indifferent and prideful, then our hearts are made dull, our eyes heavy, our eyes blind and sooner or later we are laid waste. The Word of God accomplishes His purpose.

Whatever sad and heartbreaking, but that is what we as Christians experience in this world. This is what we see around us today. Dull hearts, heavy ears, blind eyes. Indifference and rejections. Among our loves one. When that happens, my first reaction is to feel really disheartened, heavily sighing... “How long are we going to wander in this spiritual wasteland?!”

Dear Brothers and Sisters, remember the last verse that we read: “The holy seed is the stump”. You are the stump. Those who remain by God’s grace. You are the

holy seed that the Spirit spoke about. You are that miracle of genuine faith and trust and obedience in the midst of ever darkening world.

Yes, we may wonder whether the Lord will bless our efforts, our message, will our congregations grow and flourish again? Will there be a new season of God's grace? Will we be able to rejoice and celebrate the renewal of God's Church?

Will our eyes see multitudes of repentant, forgiven and overjoyed brothers and sisters brought into God's family? Will we be able to rejoice and sing and feast with them, united in the same Spirit, sharing the same hope and joy? I don't know the answer, and... actually I don't think it is important for us to know it.

We don't know what the future may or may not bring, but there are great number of things that we know for sure. Such as... Every time when our Father gathers us, when we respond and come together to celebrate the Supper of His Son Jesus, we sing together with the seraphim and with heavenly hosts: "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

And what happens then! Our Lord Himself purifies and cleanses you, forgives you, restores you, fills you with His Spirit. He feeds those who are His own with His life-giving Word, with His true body and blood, without money, without price. He feeds you eternal life; He unites us and embraces us.

This is what we know for certain. All of this is given to those who listen to Him. He is faithful and He will not withdraw His presence from those who love Him and long to be with Him. He will remain with us here until He takes us to Himself.

The world in which we live, it is what the world is supposed to be. And those who belong to the world are what they are supposed to be. No surprise. But you, you are His chosen people, chosen before the foundation of the world, called and invited to be holy and blameless in Jesus Christ, His blood washes you clean, dresses you in God's festal garments and prepares for the eternal feast that is to come.

This we know. For certain. To this we can say, yes, amen. Now, go as His people, as children of God the Father, as siblings of our Lord Jesus. For you have heard His voice. He has filled you with His Spirit, with the Spirit of joy and peace.

Go overflowing with joy for what Jesus has done for you and prepared for you, go burning with the desire to share His life-giving message. Go being at peace, knowing that our message may be rejected, and often is.

Knowing what the power of the Word of God is – it enlightens and makes blind; it kills and it makes alive. And it is up to those who listen to choose how to respond when the Spirit calls – to accept this incredible gift, or to reject the Lord of Life.

The voice of the Triune God goes forth today as it did in the days of Isaiah: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" I pray today that we all gladly respond to this voice and say in our hearts: "Here I am, Lord! Send me." Amen.