

I was driving in my car on Friday, listening to an American sports talk show, and people were calling in to discuss the following question: who is the most dominant athlete, past or present, in any of the major sports North American sports? What was interesting is that the majority consensus seemed to point to the sport of hockey, and to one particular player: Wayne Gretzky.

Wayne Gretzky was known as the Great One, and for good reason-- no one has even come close to the records he set. Sometimes I forget how dominant a player he was. In 1985, Gretzky had more points than any other player in the league. In fact, if you took away the 52 goals he scored that year, and only counted his assists, he still would have won the scoring title by 22 points. On the all time scoring list, Gretzky has 970 more points than the person listed at #2.

Have you ever found yourself in the presence of greatness? Perhaps you've met a personal hero of yours, a business guru, an athlete, someone famous. If you have found yourself in the presence of greatness, I wonder, what did you feel? How did you respond?

Grant, a good friend mine, was once walking through the Calgary Airport, on his way to catch a flight. As he was walking, he noticed a well-muscled-man walking toward him: it was none other than Bret the Hitman Hart. If you grew up like I did, watching Stampede Wrestling and the WWF, then you know that the Hitman was a legend.

Grant couldn't believe his eyes and decided that he had to say something. But at the critical moment, face to face with the Hitman, Grant was rendered both awestruck and dumbstruck; the best he could come up with was grabbing the Hitman's hand and saying:

*"Your awesome man, awesome!"* To which the Hitman replied, *"Thanks man. Thanks."* Pure poetry.

As the Hitman walked away, Grant berated himself-- *you're awesome man? I'm such an idiot!* What would you respond in the presence of greatness? How would you feel?

Last Summer, I went down to Ambleside with my family to meet up with the Rennie's; Martin and I and the kids were going to kick the soccer ball around for awhile before sitting down for dinner. As many of you know, I love the game of soccer--I've played it for most of my life. If you had asked me when I was young what I wanted to do when I got older, professional soccer player would definitely been on the list.

I love to play the game, I enjoy watching and coaching the game, I even dream about the game. Last year I had a dream in which Martin and I were walking along the Seawall and he was talking about his Whitecaps roster. And at one point in the conversation he turned to me and said, *"Mark, I want you get in shape because I need you on the Whitecaps."*

Dream or no dream, I've been waiting my whole life for this kind of invitation. But following a brief surge of excitement, I thought to myself, *I can't say "yes"--not if Dave Sattler can't come play too.* And so I asked Martin if there was room on the team for both of us, and he said that the Whitecaps needed both of us. And then I woke up--that was the end of the dream, but not the end of story.

I texted Martin immediately and told him about my dream--perhaps a word from the Lord? Let's just say that Martin has been kind enough to not come right out and say "no."

But I suppose he didn't need to. When I met Martin at Ambleside last Summer, he brought along one of the Whitecaps new young players, Kekuta Manneh--an 18 year old from Gambia. At one point Martin and I set up a little game, the two of us against Kekuta and our kids.

For those of you who play and watch sports, you've probably wondered how you would stack up against the professionals you see on t.v. That can't be that much better can they? *Yes, they can.* At one point during our friendly game, the ball bounced wildly out towards the sidelines and I went chasing after it. I wasn't running at a full sprint, but pretty close, and Kekuta ran by me so fast that I felt the breeze as he went by.

At that moment I knew my dream of playing professional soccer was over. Kekuta--at that time, an unproven rookie in the league--was so skilled, so fast, so good. I was in the presence of greatness, and I knew it.

Let me ask you: *is there anyone greater than God?* This morning, God is among us, and we are in the presence of His greatness. This morning, I'd like to continue our preaching series with yet another biblical account of a living encounter with God. This is what's at the heart of the word *theophany*. Throughout history, God has, and continues to reveal Himself to humanity--and I want to share with you Isaiah's encounter with God's greatness.

Let me encourage to open your Bible with me to Isaiah 6; if you are using the Blue Bible in front of you, you can find our text on page 1068.

*1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.*

*2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:*

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.*

*5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."*

*8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

Historians tell us that the year was approximately 740 B.C.--after 52 years on the throne, this was the year that King Uzziah died. If you want to read more about who he was and what he did, you can find more details in 2 Kings 15 and 2 Chronicles 26.

But for the purposes of this morning, it's important to know that under his strong leadership, the kingdom thrived, its borders were

expanded, and their enemies were defeated. 2 Chronicles 26:15 says of King Uzziah, “*His fame spread far and wide*”. But his greatness had a limit, an expiration date--Uzziah died like all men and women do.

The death of king could bring a nation to its knees. It was a time of uncertainty, instability, and for that reason it was also a time of opportunity--it was a prime opportunity for rival nations to rise up and declare war. When a king died, a nation’s weaknesses were exposed and magnified.

Things haven’t changed very much--the same is true today. Take a look at the business world: do you remember when Steve Jobs, the C.E.O of Apple, died? There was widespread fear that Apple stock would plummet and the company nosedive.

Or how about politics? As many of you know, Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, is 95 years old and his health is failing. He’s not even leading the country any longer and yet there is serious speculation that upon his death, oppression and violence will spring up throughout the country.

Isaiah writes, “*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord*”. Many of us live, every day, with the illusion of control. We decide where we live, where we go to school, where we work, who our friends are, who we will marry--life is filled with opportunities and we determine which ones we will engage and which we will pass by.

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<sup>1</sup> William Ernest Henley.

<sup>2</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The NIV application Commentary: Isaiah*, 129.

I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.<sup>1</sup> We live under the illusion that we control today, and with a little ingenuity, we can control the unseen future.

But then something happens. Our own personal King Uzziah dies, and with the throne vacant in our lives, our perceived sense of stability and security comes crashing down around us. Maybe the stock market crashes and your retirement savings are slashed over night. Maybe your best friend betrays you and you feel alone, vulnerable, and insecure. Maybe the test comes back from the doctor, confirming that you have an aggressive form of prostate cancer. King Uzziah is dead, the throne is vacant, and the ground beneath you begins to heave and twist.

When King Uzziah dies, then, and often only then, do we look up and see the Lord. Can I ask you this morning, *what have you placed on the throne of your life?* The things we rely on come and go, they are transient, but the Lord is forever, He is unchangeable, unshakeable.

My dear people, do not cling to Uzziah, let him die! The Lord is high and exalted, seated on the throne, and the train of His robe fills the temple. And consider this: if just the hem of God’s garment fills the temple, how big is His throne? And, “how big [is] the One sitting on the throne?”<sup>2</sup> *How big is your God?*

In vs. 2, Isaiah speaks of two creatures known as seraphim; this is the only place in the entire Bible that any such beings are mentioned. The word seraph literally means “*burning one*”. In the Scriptures, fire represents purity, holiness, cleansing. These winged creatures are ablaze, reflecting the purity, the holiness, the glory of God.

Isaiah describes the seraphim as six-winged creatures. One author writes, “With two wings they ‘*covered their faces*’ (**in reverence**), with two they ‘*covered their feet*’ (perhaps bowing down **in humility**), and with two they ‘*were flying*’ (**in service**).”<sup>3</sup>

I believe that Isaiah’s vision of the seraphim provides a pattern for our life before God, and in the time remaining I want to elaborate on this three-fold pattern of reverence, humility, and service.

**1. Reverence (6:1-4):** As the seraphim cover their eyes in reverence, these burning ones called to one another and spoke of a reality that they knew with every fiber of their being: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is filled with His glory.*”

These creatures live unhindered in the conscious presence of greatness--the greatness, the holiness, the glory of God. In the Bible, holiness has to do with otherness. Though humanity has been made in God’s image, God is utterly unlike us with respect to perfection and purity. In every thought, every word, and every deed, God is righteous, perfect, and pure. Hebrews 12:28-29 describes God as “a consuming fire.”

*Holy, Holy, Holy*, the seraphim cry, *the whole earth is filled with His glory*. Our English word, “glory,” comes from the Hebrew word “*kavod*.” When translated literally, *kavod* means “heavy or weighty”. I suppose if you bumped into a high school friend you haven’t seen in years, you could say something like “*you’re looking a little kavod these days!*”

The reality is, the word “*kavod*” was rarely used literally in the Scriptures; it was used figuratively to describe one who was weighty, a person of significance, someone worthy of esteem. The seraphim remind us that the visible world has been filled with God’s invisible, weighty, presence. Psalm 24:10 says, “*The Lord Almighty--He is the King of Glory.*”

**illus:** God’s glory filling the earth is more than a concept, it’s a reality, and every so often God pulls back the curtain so that we can see, hear, feel this reality--it happened to Isaiah and it still happens today.

A couple of years ago I was in a class at Regent College and a guest lecturer was teaching us about healing. When he wrapped up his lecture, he offered to pray for us. He was quiet for awhile, seeking the Holy Spirit’s direction for prayer, and then he began to speak out specific words of knowledge that God was impressing upon his mind. He would say something like, “Is there anyone here who is experiencing the pain of a broken relationship with your father? I believe the Lord wants to bring some healing to you today,” and then if someone raised their hand he would pray for them.

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Isaiah*, 23-24.

I sat there for awhile, observing, and praying along with him for my classmates. But at one point I said to the Lord, “*if he asks if there is anyone suffering from back pain, I’m going to raise my hand.*” Just a few days earlier, I had been rear-ended in a car accident and was experiencing constant headaches and significant pain in my back. A few minutes later he asked if anyone in the class was suffering with back pain; I raised my hand and walked to the front of the class for prayer.

He put his hand on my shoulder and began to pray for healing. After a minute or so of praying, he asked if I could feel the pain lessening; I couldn’t, I told him so, and he went back to praying. Before long my three-day-headache completely disappeared and the pain in my back began to diminish.

But something else happened, something I had never experienced before. I felt what I can only describe as the weightiness of God’s presence rest upon my physical body. As many of you know, I’m a runner--I may look skinny, but I’ve got strong legs; I’ve trained so that I can run for hours at a time. But in that moment of prayer, I felt the weight of God’s presence, His glory, His *kavod*, and it was all I could do to stagger 5 feet to the nearest chair.

God’s glory, His weightiness is more than a concept, it’s a reality; His presence fills the earth, and fills our lives as we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit.

We can express reverence for God in a myriad of ways, but the seraphim model one specific way--spoken worship. We worship God

because He is holy, He is other, He is glorious. With the seraphim and all of creation we can sing the words of Revelation 4:11, “*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things...by your will they were created and have their being.*” The question is, *will you worship? Will you bow down?*

If reverence pertains to seeing the Lord, then humility pertains to seeing oneself.

**2. Humility (6:5-7):** Isaiah’s initial vision in vs. 1-4, a vision of God’s majesty, holiness, and glory led to a second, equally terrifying vision--a vision of his own corruption and sin. Ronald Youngblood writes, “no one can catch a glimpse of God’s glory without recognizing [their] own lostness and ruin.”<sup>4</sup>

**illus:** the story is told of the famous English author, G. K. Chesterton submitting an essay to a local newspaper. The newspaper was seeking written submissions to the following question: *what is wrong with the world?* The essay Chesterton submitted contained only two words: *I am.*

His words cut against the grain of his culture every bit as much as they still do today. What’s wrong with the world? *I am. We are.* As Westerners we are happy to be rugged individualists, to stand on our own two feet, to provide for ourselves, and to take credit for our success and achievement. But when it comes to taking responsibility for our shortcomings, our flaws, our sin--we’re content to look the other way.

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<sup>4</sup> Youngblood, 25.

In Revelation 3:17, Jesus speaks to a church that had fallen into self-deception. “*17 You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*”

In 1989, Billy Joel wrote the following lyrics: “*We didn’t start the fire, it was always burning since the world’s been turning.*” Our current cultural climate promotes the following outlook on life: *I’m not my own fault.* And that may be true in part--we may not be culpable for all that we are--but we are all responsible to deal with who we are and who we are becoming.

Every moment of our lives we are surrounded by greatness--the greatness of God. When we stand before God, each of us stands alone. God is the One person we cannot fool; excuses will not fly with Him--He sees through every blame-shift and half-truth. In His presence nothing remains hidden.

When Isaiah experienced God’s holiness, he came apart at the seams crying “*Woe to me!*” *I’m done for! I’m ruined! I’m a sinner in the presence of a holy God!*

Perhaps you’ve had such a moment? I have. When our Uzziah is dead, our defenses down, our excuses exposed, and every escape route cut off, there are moments of absolute clarity--we realize that we are not God, not even close. We recognize, by the light of His holiness, that our heart is filled with pride. Or bitterness. Or greed.

Perhaps you’ve had a moment where you admitted: *I can’t save myself! I’m a control freak, or, I’m constantly afraid, or, I’m an*

*addict, or, I’m selfish to the core, or, my hatred is consuming me.* No one likes to be exposed.

But the good news is that the One who exposes our sin and shame is the same One who heals and forgives. The One who reveals, also redeems. The One who is holy is merciful beyond measure. The Righteous Judge is the One who died on a cross, in our place. The gap that exists between God and us has been forever bridged by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:4-5 says, “*4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*”

There is no word in the holy scriptures more important than this word: *grace.* While we were still God’s enemies, Jesus sacrificed His life for ours; He chose you--*will you receive Him today?*

The more you spend time with Jesus, the more you encounter His loving kindness, the more you know that He is for you, not against you. His love is...his love is essential to life, like oxygen, like your heart beating. When you read His word, when you listen with your heart, you will discover that God loves you with an everlasting love--and that changes everything.

Unless we spend time with Jesus, we forget what He is really like and we begin to impose upon Him what we have seen or experienced from other people. Perhaps you’ve been “exposed” by other people--a coach, a teacher, a parent, friend, or spouse--you’ve heard them lay out all that is wrong with you. Perhaps you wear shame around your neck like an accessory.

Unless you spend regular time with Jesus, you're more likely to run from His exposing work, rather than to embrace it as a gift. God's holiness is a gift to us. He doesn't reveal our shadow side in order to shame us; God reveals what He intends to heal and restore.

So don't run from Him--that would be foolish--run towards Him! Come to the cross with your your shame, your wounds, your sin--there is life here, forgiveness and mercy, there is healing and transformation for you that will not find anywhere else. *Will you come to the cross today?*

If reverence pertains to seeing the Lord (6:1-4), and humility pertains to seeing oneself (see 6:5-7), then service pertains to seeing the world (see 6:8-13).

**3. Service (6:8-13):** All of us, right here and now, find ourselves in the presence of God's greatness. And a part of what makes Him so great is His loving movement towards the world.

After seeing God, and then himself, God called Isaiah and gave him a vision of the world as it still is: rebellious, lost, and without hope apart from God's grace. The picture God paints in vs. 9-13 isn't nearly as rosy as we might like. We are told that as we speak God's words to the world, some will listen, but many will not.

Did you notice that God didn't saddle Isaiah with a target, or number that he has to reach? God told Him to go and be faithful in bearing witness; the same is true for us today. *Will you go? Will you faithfully bear witness to the greatness, the holiness, the glory of God?*

As we conclude this morning, we are going to give voice to God's glory, His holiness, His majesty, and I want to encourage you to lift up your voice. God's holiness is a gift to us; let's take time to thank Him for it.

### **Worship**

### **Prayer**

**Benediction:** May the Lord give us eyes to see Jesus, high and exalted, the humility to receive His healing, and the courage to bear witness to Christ's gracious love.