

## 7. The Total Demand and Paul Tillich's Vision of the Holy

The paragraphs commented upon in this chapter come from Paul Tillich's sermon "The Experience of the Holy." This sermon is Chapter 10 in his book of sermons *The Shaking of the Foundations*, published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1948.

Isaiah 6 is the text for this sermon. This is not an easy text because of its mythological features and the strong tendency in our culture to take the Bible literally. So, before sharing Tillich's reflections and commenting on them, I will first work with this biblical text directly. Isaiah 6 begins with these words:

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord . . .

To understand Isaiah's experience, we need to visualize how we might experience something similar in our contemporary world. King Uzziah was a strong and wise King. This was the end of an era. So imagine yourself saying, "In the year that President Kennedy was shot, I saw God." Or "In the year that planes were crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center, I saw God." How did Isaiah describe seeing God?

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the skirt of his robe filled the temple. About him were attendant seraphim, and each had six wings; one pair covered his face and one pair his feet, and one pair was spread in flight. They were calling endlessly to one another,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts:  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

This is the sort of passage that provokes many of us to give up on understanding the Bible. To understand these verses, we have to give up our literalism, and we have to give up the belief that Isaiah was a literalist. This is poetry. This is like dream images. So what did Isaiah actually experience? He was aware of a Power greater than that of his earthly king. And this experience was Awe-filling. "Holy" and "glory" are other words for "Awe." The seraphim are Awe-figures filling the house of worship with their flapping wings. Isaiah does not literally see God, he only sees these seraphim who hide God with their wings. That is, Isaiah only sees the Awe. The Awesome Reality occasioning the Awe is hidden from view. How does the experience of seeing God affect Isaiah?

And, as each [seraphim] called, the threshold shook to its foundations,  
while the house was filled with smoke.  
Then I cried, Woe is me! I am lost,  
for I am a man of unclean lips  
and I dwell among a people of unclean lips;  
yet with these eyes I have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.

In this experience, Isaiah's sense of truth, indeed his whole religion, was shaken to its foundations. All his best speeches went up in smoke. He experienced himself as lost, a man whose lips were dirty with false talk. He saw that the people among whom he dwelt also had lying lips. Perhaps we have had experiences like that. Perhaps before September 11, 2001 we thought we were a safe and righteous nation much beloved by the world's people. Perhaps before we discovered how much political, economic, and cultural influence huge corporations have over our lives, we thought our nation was a democracy. And how did Isaiah know his old

truths were lies? He had seen the King of Truth. "The Lord of Hosts" means the Master of all Truth messengers. So then what happened?

Then one of the seraphim flew to me carrying in his hand a glowing coal which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said,  
See, this has touched your lips;  
your iniquity is removed,  
and your sin is wiped away.

Isaiah's lying was singed, and Isaiah was welcomed home to Reality. When events smash our old sense of reality, we find our lies being audited. And we also find ourselves being welcomed home to Reality. It may be a surprising Reality, perhaps a dreadful Reality, but it is also a much more glorious Reality. And most important, we are welcome. We are forgiven. We are home. What happened to Isaiah next?

Then I heard the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?  
And I answered, Here am I; send me.  
He said, Go and tell the people: . . .

Isaiah was not a superperson to whom God speaks. He was just an ordinary person like each of us, and each of us can have similar experiences of being called in the midst of our historical events. Perhaps seeing U.S. politicians allow the assault weapons ban to expire even though sixty percent of the people favor it stuns us into realizing that the National Rifle Association has more influence in this country than the people do. Perhaps this realization calls us to tell our companions that we do not live in a true democracy. Perhaps we feel called to stand alongside those shocked and sobered law enforcement officers who know that boatloads of assault weapons will land on our shores. The prophet is simply someone who sees it and tells it the way it is.

In the remainder of the sixth chapter of Isaiah, God tells Isaiah that the message he is to speak will not be heard, "This people's wits are dulled; their ears are deafened; and their eyes blinded." Understandably, Isaiah asks, "How long, O Lord?" That is, how long must I speak words that no one hears? And the Lord's answer is basically this, "As long as it takes" (that is, until the actual unfolding of history supports the truth that the prophet speaks).

Paul Tillich begins his sermon with these words about this Isaiah passage:

□

This chapter is one of the greatest in the Old Testament. □ It clearly reveals the essence of Biblical Religion. □ The prophet describes the vision of his vocation in words and pictures which express at the same time his fundamental experience of God, his interpretation of human existence, and his conception of the prophet's task. His experience of God is an experience of the holiness of God. He interprets man's condition as one of uncleanness and inability to face God. The prophet's task is paradoxically set against the natural meaning of prophecy. These three ideas belong together and comprise perhaps the highest expression ever given to the prophetic spirit.

The prophet does not describe God Himself in any way. He speaks only of the train which filled the temple, of the angels surrounding the Lord's throne, of the shaking of the foundation, and of the smoke filling the house. In this manner he indicates that the revelation of God is at the same time the veiling of God. God can reveal Himself only by remaining veiled. But even the veiled revelation makes Isaiah feel that he is perishing. The facing of God, even if it be a mere approaching to His sphere, even if God Himself remain hidden, means the annihilation of man.

The same feeling is expressed in the cry of the seraphim. "Holy" has a double meaning, as the context clearly shows. It means the majesty of which the world is full; and it means purity as

against human impurity. Glory without purity is the character of all pagan gods. And purity without glory is the character of all the humanistic ideas of God. Humanism has transformed the inaccessibility of God into the sublimity of His moral commands. Humanism has forgotten that God's majesty, as experienced by the prophet, implies the shaking of the foundation wherever He appears, and the veil of smoke whenever He shows Himself. When God is identified with an element in human nature, as in humanism, the terrifying and annihilating encounter with majesty becomes an impossibility. But "Holy" means also moral perfection, purity, goodness, truth, and justice. God's glory can fulfill all the world, only because He is holy in this double sense. The glory of the gods who are not holy in this double sense can fulfill only one country, one family or tribe, one nation or state, or one sphere of human life. Consequently, they do not possess the truth and justice and purity of the God Who is really God. They are demons aspiring to holiness, but excluded from it, because their glory is majesty without purity. Therefore, let us say, during this time particularly, "Thou only art holy!"

"Holy" has been a hard concept for our times. Tillich gives us the clues we need. He indicates that in the Christian experience of God "Holy" means both "glory" and "purity." Purity without the glory characterizes the humanistic ideas of God. Glory without the purity characterizes the worship of country, family, tribe, nation, and other "glorious" groupings. We need to illustrate from our own experience all three of these options.

The worship of a glorious nation is illustrated not only by the fascism of Adolf Hitler but by the my-country-right-or-wrong attitudes in the semi-democratic U.S.A. When cries of "unpatriotic" discourage us from criticizing our president, a wartime president, we are slipping into the worship of nationalism. We are pursuing glory without purity, when we are not open to see the bad behaviors of our nation or to see our nation's omissions in being a responsible servant of the needs of other national communities and the natural planet as a whole. The glory of the nation is a demonic glory because it lacks purity in its self assessments and in its benevolence toward others.

The more liberal churches of Christendom are an example of purity without glory. They have become humanistic rather than Christian in their neglect or denial of the God of glory, the God of majesty, the God of severe Otherness who shakes our foundations with terrifying and annihilating encounters. These churches have emphasized moral perfection, purity, goodness, truth, and justice, but these words have all become sentimental and shallow from a lack of glory. In the worst case scenarios, Sunday morning sermons have become Reader's Digest heart warmers of negligible religious worth. Our speaking the truth has fallen short of anything that might approach controversial. Our pursuing justice has fallen short of furious opposition to injustice and indefatigable work to construct new justice. Our idea of moral perfection, purity, and goodness has been reduced to irrelevant niceness.

So what does it mean to unite glory and purity in a true experience of the One Holy God and to then hear the call of that God to truly holy living? Tillich clarifies that this direction begins with a confession of uncleanness.

The prophet confesses that he is a man of unclean lips, and that he lives in the midst of a people with unclean lips. He emphasizes his lips, because his work is preaching; but the impurity of his lips symbolizes the impurity of his entire existence, and of the existence of individuals and society as a whole. Isaiah exhibits profound insight when he identifies himself with his unclean people in the very moment that he is made worthy of his exceptional vision. The difference between mystical and prophetic religion lies in that insight. For even in the greatest ecstasy, a prophet does not forget the social group to which he belongs, and its unclean character which he cannot lose. Consequently, the prophetic ecstasy, as opposed to the mystical ecstasy, is never an end in itself, but rather the means of receiving the divine commands which are to be preached to the people. Isaiah's vision reveals the two conditions for prophetic

existence. The lips of the prophet must first be purified by fire. He can then hear the Voice of God, the condition for his being sent by God. Nobody can be the prophet of God through his own strength; and nobody can absolve himself. Only the power of Divine Holiness, having touched our existence, can bring us near to God. Something of our existence, sin, iniquity, or uncleanness must be burned away, must be annihilated. Only through such annihilation can God speak to us and through us. But whether or when He speaks to us at all does not depend upon us in any way. Isaiah did not produce either the vision or the purification. He was overcome with terror and awe. And he had to act. For God asks, "Who will go for us?" God waits for the answer. He does not compel. Isaiah's decision to go must be free. Freedom of decision is the second condition for prophetic existence. A prophet must decide whether or not he will dedicate himself to the task. With respect to our fate and vocation we are free; with respect to our relation to God we are powerless. The majesty of God is evident in either case.

This paragraph is full of challenging statements, especially if we are clear that the call to be a true Christian and the call to be a prophet are the same call. The call to be a true Christian is simply the call to be a true human being. All of us are being asked by the prophet Isaiah's witness to embrace our identification with the people among whom we dwell and realize that our speech, our action, our style of living among them has been unclean, has been a lie, a going along with commonly accepted lies. Once this annihilating experience has run its course in our lives, we do not fly away into our own private mystical heavens; rather, we become aware that the One Holy God is waiting for us to answer the call to action. Like Isaiah we must freely decide to be a prophet. And this horrific freedom is our deepest dignity. In embracing it or in not embracing it we meet the overwhelming majesty of God. So let us say that we, like Isaiah choose to respond to the call to be God's man or woman, then what? Here is how Tillich completes his sermon:

The prophet then describes the content of the divine command. "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes." Our natural moral feelings refuse to accept such a paradox. For if we speak, we wish to make ourselves heard; and when we preach, we wish to convert and to heal. But the prophet accepts the divine command. And when his natural feeling impels him to ask, "How long?" he receives the answer, "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate!" No hope or promise is expressed. What is the meaning of that paradox? It means that true prophets are the instruments of God in the actualization of His judgment against mankind. They are instruments in so far as the prophetic word always excites the opposition of man with respect to both his vital existence and his moral and religious existence – indeed, particularly with respect to his religious existence.

All people desire false prophets, who, through the glorification of their gods, glorify their followers and themselves. People long to be flattered in regard to their desires and virtues, their religious feeling and social activity, their will to power and utopian hopes, their knowledge and love, their family and race, their class and nation. And a false prophet can always be found to glorify the demon they worship. But when the voice of the true prophet is raised, they shut their ears, they contradict his statements, and they ultimately persecute and kill him, because they are not able to receive his message. The order endures until the prophet's words are fulfilled, and the cities are destroyed, and the land is made desolate.

We are all eager for the prophetic spirit. We are anxious to lead the people to a new justice and to a better social order. We long to save the nations from a threatening doom. But does *our* word, if it be God's word, have better effect than that which Isaiah saw in his vision and experienced in his life? Are we more than he was? Are our people today less devoted to demons than his people were? If not, can we expect anything other than what he was told to expect through his vision? We must pray for the prophetic spirit which has been dead for so long in the Churches. And he who feels that he has been given the prophetic task must fulfill it as Isaiah did. He must preach the message of a new justice and of a new social order in the name of God and His honor. But he must expect to be opposed and persecuted not only by his

enemies, but also by his friends, party, class, and nation. He must expect to be persecuted to the degree to which his word is the word of that God Who alone is holy, that God Who alone is able to create a holy people out of the remnant of every nation.

Is Tillich correct? Are we having similar conversations with the Ultimate Holiness? Perhaps we encounter deaf ears and blind eyes when we try to tell people that huge transnational corporations are running our lives – that we must confront this core problem in order to achieve a wholesome destiny for our planet – that this horrific imbalance of power controls our now-unfree markets, our now-undemocratic governments, and our now-dumbed-down cultures. Perhaps we also cry out to God, “How long, O Lord, do we have to say things that so few people want to hear?” And perhaps we are shocked but also strengthened by God’s answer: “As long as it takes.” Or “Until it has become so obvious that everyone can see it.”

Perhaps we find ourselves called to tell our companions that the United States is an imperial power ruling the world (or attempting to rule the world) for the benefit of the wealthy owners of international business. Perhaps we feel called to tell our companions that this world rulership is futile and unwise, that it spawns the terrorists we self-righteously use to justify our military actions against them. Perhaps we feel called to tell our companions that this course can only lead to more and more tragedy. Perhaps we feel called to tell our companions how blind they are to the lesson of Israel and Palestine – that unrelenting state terrorism forces the oppressed into terrorist responses – that there is no exodus from this circle of violence except justice and compassion and flexibility toward all people. Such callings to tell the truth to our companions are the callings of the prophet. And it is part of the task of every Christian to be such a prophet.

Perhaps we also feel called to reveal to our companions in Christian churches how far they have fallen from commitment to the Holiness of which Tillich speaks. Perhaps we feel called to oppose their thoughtless literalism, shallow moralism, and social irrelevance. Perhaps we feel called to challenge the false prophets who for the prize of larger buildings and better salaries pamper people, indulge people, soothe people with permission to worship false gods. Perhaps we feel called to point out that such worship is demonic and has tragic consequences throughout the planet. Will such messages be heard? Or will their ears be closed and their eyes blind?

And perhaps we feel called to confront those who in disgust are abandoning Christianity altogether. Perhaps we feel drawn to share with them that a true recovery of the Christian breakthrough will participate deeply in bringing healing to all the core issues that ail us. Will they hear or will they also opt to avoid the prophetic task in favor of safety, comfort, and perhaps cynicism about all religion and all hope for meaningful social change?

How long, O Lord? Indeed, how long can we actually endure carrying out the calling of bringing truth to people who won’t hear or can’t hear? What is the hope here? Our hope is in the truth itself. Truth is its own reward. The truth is holy. Holiness is the truth. Or to put this personally, Awe is my true nature, and my true nature is Awe. To be this Awe and to share this Awe-filled truth is love for myself and for my companions. Rejecting the truth always leads to some sort of deep tragedy. Yet when people reject the truth, it is still the truth. And it may happen that people, like the people of Nineveh, will repent and avoid the doom that formerly awaited them. But whether or not people repent, and whether or not the doom comes, the prophet’s job is simple and hopeful and loving. Tell the truth. The truth is always best. Herein is our hope. And we have that hope now. Only in the living now can we know that we are “with it” rather than “out of it.” In that knowledge we find our joy and our peace. In that love of the Holy God of truth we find our unending life and our unfolding glory.