When you hear this music, don’t you expect the arrival of something awesome? Indeed today we do get to preview an awesome sight: the glorious God of the universe. We’ll learn that when God makes an appearance we say, “Woe!” but God says, “No!” and then he says, “Go!”

Although no one has ever seen God in his full glory, 2,750 years ago a man by the name of Isaiah received a glimpse of God’s splendor. In the year the king of Judah, Uzziah died, Isaiah saw THE King that never dies. He saw God seated on a throne. Not just any throne, mind you, but a throne that was “high and exalted” soaring awesomely above Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1).

Some of us need to be reminded that God is still on the throne in our day. When we consider alarming things like terrorism and the threat of wars, crime, violence, moral depravity, gangs, drugs, and other disturbing things we need a fresh vision of God on the throne high and lifted up. He still hears and answers prayers. He is still working out his plan and his purpose in the midst of what looks like a world spinning out of control. But God is in control. He is high and lifted up, and he will not compromise with sin and man’s rebellion.

There was something else awesome about God’s heavenly throne room; it looked like a temple. If it was identical to Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem, it would have been about 30 meters long, or approximately the third of the length of a football field. That might not sound so impressive for a divine throne room but the temple didn’t house God himself, only the train from his royal robe. Isaiah says that the train was so big and long that it filled the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

Like any king, God had attendants and they were awesome. Isaiah calls God’s attendants seraphs. We know them as angels. The Hebrew word “seraphim” means “burners.” That name must have described their appearance - bright and shiny as if they were on fire. Isaiah also tells us that the seraphs had six wings: two to cover their face, two to cover their feet, and two with which to fly. The song the seraphs sang might explain why they covered their face and their feet. “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3) the seraphs sang. The basic meaning of the word “holy” is “separate.” God is separate from his creation. He’s not like us. He’s without beginning or end. He doesn’t have mood swings. He’s absolutely fair in everything that he does. And most importantly he’s without sin. God is so holy and great that not even his angels dare to look directly at him or expose their feet to him. Therefore in an act of humility, they cover their face and feet with their wings.

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty...” We sang those very words in the opening hymn this morning but not like the seraphs did. Isaiah says that the seraphs were so loud that the doorposts, even the very foundation of the temple shook! Big deal you say? You’ve had those cars with the suped-up stereo systems drive by your house rattling your windows. Trust me. This was much more awesome. The doors of Solomon’s temple were made of pine, overlaid with sheets of gold, and were 10 m high. It would take a lot to get a doorpost holding a door like that to shake wouldn’t it? And it wasn’t just the doorposts but the very foundation of the temple that was shaking – a veritable earthquake! While all that was going on the temple filled with smoke. Isaiah didn’t just see and hear what was going on, he could smell and perhaps even taste it! Can you imagine standing in Isaiah’s shoes? You will be some day. “Wow! Really? Awesome!” That’s what we might think but that’s not what Isaiah thought.

Instead of “Wow!” he said, “Woe!” Not “Whoa, Dude!” But “Woe to me! I am cut off! 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” (Isaiah 6:5). Have you ever cleaned your living room and thought that it was clean only to have the sun shine in through the window and reveal all the dust that was left behind? Ruth Graham tells of the time that the TV news wanted to interview her and
her husband Billy at their home. They got the house all spic and span clean. That is until the TV lights were turned on in their living room. All that Ruth could see was the dust and cobwebs that had been missed. Light will always expose the dirt. The closer we get to Jesus the more we will have to deal with “hidden sin” in our lives. Little things that we had never noticed before will become a big deal when exposed by the light.

Standing before God, Isaiah saw himself with awesome clarity. In the glare of God’s holiness Isaiah realized just how ugly his sins really were. For once there was no one else to compare himself with other than God and he knew that he was deserving of God’s eternal punishment for his sin.

Isaiah’s preview of God allows us to see God for who he is. God is love, yes, but God is also just. He doesn’t accept plea bargains to reduce sentences. He doesn’t compare us to others – only to himself. When we realize that, Isaiah’s confession becomes our own: “Woe to me!” Not, “Whoa, I’m glad I’m not like other sinners.” If we’re not convinced of our guilt, look at how Isaiah described his lips. He called them unclean. Could we also not admit the same thing about our lips? Think of the kinds of things our lips take in that aren’t God-pleasing. Maybe it’s an excessive amount of alcohol, or an addiction to prescription drugs. How about the things that pour out of our lips that make them dirty? Things like half-truths, hurtful remarks, and proud boasts. Why, we don’t even have to open our lips to make them impure. Just by smiling at a dirty joke, or frowning when someone asks for a minute of our time we show ourselves to be sinners deserving of God’s wrath. And that’s just our lips! We haven’t even talked about how unclean our eyes, our hands, and our heart make us.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us standing with Isaiah before the throne of God just waiting to be punished. But that’s not what happened. Before Isaiah had the chance to say more than “Woe!” the awesome God said, “No! Your sins will not condemn you.” God made this clear by sending a seraph over with a live coal from the altar with which he touched Isaiah’s lips and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:7). How awesome! God gave Isaiah a pardon before he even had the chance to ask for one. Isaiah didn’t even have to reach out to accept the forgiveness. God brought the pardon to Isaiah!

But just how can a holy God, who must destroy sin like antiseptic must destroy bacteria, forgive sinners like Isaiah and us? The answer to that question lies in the coal the seraph held. The seraph had taken that coal from the altar where animals were sacrificed. God had told his people that sin demands a payment of life. In his grace God allowed the Israelites to offer up animals instead of their own lives for their sins. Of course those animals couldn’t really take away the sins of the people but they did point ahead to the Lamb of God, Jesus, who would take away the sins of the world. By dying on the cross Jesus took the heat for our sins allowing God the Father to give us a pardon. This coal is symbolic of Christ’s death on the cross. It represents the cleansing blood of Christ that keeps on cleansing us from all sin.

The way that the angel delivered the message of forgiveness to Isaiah was also awesome. God didn’t just tell Isaiah that he was forgiven; he showed him by having the seraph touch his lips with a live coal. Doesn’t that remind you of Holy Communion? There, God assures us that our sins are forgiven by touching our lips with his Son’s body and blood. How awesome!

One day Henry Ford was driving in the Michigan countryside when he came upon a man whose Model T had broken down. The guy was bent under the hood trying to figure what was wrong. Mr. Ford stopped and asked if he could take a look. In a few minutes, he had the car running. The grateful owner said, “I’m amazed at your ability; you fixed my car so easily.” Ford
replied, “I ought to be able to fix it, because I’m the one who designed it.” The same is true with God—He designed us, and He can fix whatever’s wrong with us. And He has done so, through his Son Jesus Christ.

As Isaiah stood there cleansed from his sin he heard God say: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8) After God’s “No!” came God’s “Go!” What was Isaiah’s response to God’s call to service? Isaiah was so awestruck that he said, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8) Don’t you just love Isaiah’s response? He answers God’s call to service before he even knows what he’s volunteering for. Isaiah didn’t even ask how long the task would take, or what it would cost him. How could he after his God had not counted the cost of sending his Son to die for him? God’s unconditional love moved Isaiah to unconditional service. As it turns out Isaiah was given the difficult task of preaching to people who weren’t going to listen to what he had to say. But it didn’t matter. Isaiah faithfully spoke God’s Word because God’s love for him would not allow him to do otherwise.

Brothers and sisters, God is calling us today. How are we going to respond? Are we first going to ask what it is that God wants us to do, how long it will take, and how much it will cost before we decide whether or not to answer his call? How can we ask those questions when Jesus did not ask how long he would have to be gone from his heavenly throne to save us, or how much he would have to suffer to win forgiveness? God’s unconditional love also moves us to unconditional service.

So what kind of things does God have in mind for us to do? Well, he has called us to support the ministry of Open Bible and around the world. How much will it cost? Does it matter? Instead ask yourself, “How has God blessed me to support the ministry with my best gifts?” Who will take time to help that person who just got out of the hospital, and needs some help getting groceries, running errands, or just spending time visiting. Who will spend a little extra time with the lady in the nursing home? Who will go over to that new member sitting by themselves at Fellowship time or in church? Who will bring God’s words of hope and encouragement to that member who has kids that are causing them undo heartache and grief? Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? My friends, if you listen carefully, you will hear God calling. He's calling you into his service. To simply serve him in different ways in your life, serve him by caring for the physical and spiritual needs of those around you. Whatever the case, be assured that God is calling. He's calling for you.

(Play the closing bars of Also Sprach Zarathustra.) Wouldn’t it be great if at the end of this music God would make a glorious appearance as he did for Isaiah? In time he will. We have his word on it. But note well it wasn’t the awesome vision of God that moved Isaiah to service, no, God’s appearance only made Isaiah say: “Woe!” Instead it was God’s “No!” regarding the punishment Isaiah deserved for his sins that moved the prophet to respond favorably to God’s “Go!” Regarding the punishment we deserve for ours sins God has also said, “No!” and now he says to us forgiven sinners, “Go!” Amen.