



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**The Holy Trinity**

**May 27, 2018**

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### **“Burning Coal for Unclean Lips”**

*(Isaiah 6:5-7)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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’” (Isaiah 6:5-7).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever.

**Amen**

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Every year, the Green Bay Packers hire social media consultants. They come in multiple times a year and teach the players how to avoid making the big mistakes on Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook . . . The Packers organization is very deliberate about it; they spend quite a bit of time actually on the topic.

So what sort of things do the consultants tell them? First and most important, assume you are always, always on record. Social media is not private, even with all your privacy controls on. There are very smart people out there who can and do hack into your accounts.

Second, know that the public has a long memory. One slip of the tweet will haunt you for a very long time.

Third, be aware of the ramifications and consequences. Your little kids, nieces and nephews will one day read what you wrote. But there are other consequences. It's not just about you; you're representing your employer, and potential future employers. Just like the requisite background and drug tests, they will be checking your social media record, and your value as a potential employee or player goes down with every infraction.

It's true for us all with social media. It's true also with what we say with our lips. How many CEOs are in the hot seat for being indecent or abusive? How many rank and file workers have lost their jobs for expressing rage at a manager? How many marriages have crumbled for all the verbal assaults? How many hurts do we carry around because of words people to us or of us?

Words are important. God spoke the universe into existence with words. Satan beguiled Adam and Eve with

words. Jesus forgave people with words, and healed people with words, and settled storms . . . with words. We encourage people, and build them up with words. We tear them to shreds with words. Words make a difference. Anyone who takes God seriously had better take their words seriously.

In our text, Isaiah is recounting the vision he had of the Lord in his glory. He writes, “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Notice, Isaiah’s description of God can rise no higher than the hem of his robe. It’s similar to Exodus 24 when Moses and his companions saw God. They cannot manage to describe anything higher than the pavement under his feet, made of sapphire, clear as crystal. They cannot lift their heads any higher. Why? Because God is absolutely perfect, pure, and sinless. And we who are imperfect and sinful cannot survive God’s holy presence. In our current state, we cannot look at him face to face.

Isaiah goes on to describe some angelic beings, what he calls seraphim, literally “fiery beings.” Mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, each has six wings. With two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying, and with two they covered their faces. Even these holy creatures dare not look into the face of their Creator. Even the angels, perfect beings without sin cover their faces and their feet.

The seraphs are calling one to another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Holy: without sin. The sound of their voices is enough to shake the foundations of the temple. Isaiah is standing in the presence of the Thrice Holy: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Again, not Good News. This is not a walk with Jesus in the Garden. Isaiah is a sinner in the presence of Holy God. “Woe is me!” he cries. “For I am lost!” I’m finished. I’m done for. “I am a man of unclean lips, living in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Isaiah is despairing over his sin.

Why do you think Isaiah is worried about his lips? Why isn’t he worried about his adulterous eyes instead, or

his unclean thoughts? Maybe he notices that what comes from our lips is in stark contrast to the praise coming from the lips of the Seraphim. Maybe it's because our tongues get us into lots of trouble. Our tongues, James writes, control the whole person like a bit controls a horse, or a rutter controls a ship.

Ecclesiastes 3 says "there is a time to be silent and a time to speak." Unfortunately, we get that all mixed up. When we should be silent, we blurt out all kinds of evil and half truths. And when we should speak up (on behalf of the oppressed, or slandered) that's precisely when we listen oh so carefully and attentively.

Every year, with the 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation class, I play that old game where I tell a secret to the first student, who then passes it along to the next and so on, to see what we have at the end. Just to give them a fighting chance, and to motivate them, sometimes I'll divide the class into two smaller groups, boys against girls. Every year, the results are appalling, for boys and girls. By the time it gets back to me I can hardly recognize the original statement. The message always comes back warped, distorted, bent out of shape, laughably inaccurate.

Imagine what can happen when we throw a little hostile intent into the mix. Imagine what can happen when we want to knock a person down a few pegs. Better yet, don't imagine anything . . . just remember. Remember the last time you chose to put a sharp edge on something you heard before you passed it along to a friend or spouse. Remember the last time you chose to malign another person's reputation with your lips. Maybe it was rock solid truth, but you passed it along anyway when you should have kept it to yourself out of love which "covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8).

"I am a man of unclean lips amidst a people of unclean lips." What a shame it is that with our lips we praise God and with those same lips we assassinate our neighbor's reputation (Jms 3:9). What a shame that we can discipline our tongues just long enough to give a great first impression

to a stranger. But if that stranger spends a little more time with us, sooner or later our lips will betray our true, sinful nature. Our tongues will break free of their feeble restraints. Sooner or later, the viper within hisses and strikes and injects its venom. “Woe is me!” Isaiah shouts. “I’m a man of unclean lips living in the midst of a people with unclean lips.” Words matter. Jesus warned us, “You brood of vipers . . . I tell you that you will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word you have spoken” (Mt. 12). I wince every time I hear it.

The stakes are high on a number of levels. I read this last week that suicide has become the second leading cause of death for young people, those between 18 and 24. Sociologists are suggesting Social Media has a lot to do with it, the bullying and slandering and maliciousness that is so rampant. Many young men and women just don’t have the tools yet to deal with such hostility.

In the past gossip and slander would eventually fade from people’s memories. If you had to, you could even move away from your reputation. But you can’t move away from the internet, and it doesn’t forget. So the stakes have become much higher.

In Colossians 4, Paul says, “Let your speech always be gracious, as though seasoned with salt (v. 6). Ps. 141 says, “Set a watch” (that is, a guard, a gatekeeper) “before my mouth, O Lord, and guard the door of my lips” (v. 3). And of course, your mother told you, as mine did, “If you don’t have anything nice to say then zip it!”

One thing that can help is to pause before you talk or tweet, and ask yourself: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary? Does it improve on the silence? I like that one. Proverbs 17 says “Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent” (v. 28).

How often at the end of the day I wish I could go back and scrub up the record. I wish I could be given a transcript of everything I said. It’d be nice to edit the grammar, improve the humor, and all that. But it would really be nice to black out everything I should not have said,

everything that ran unchecked through those gates. Unfortunately, that's not how it works. Once the words are let loose there's no bringing them back. Only God can make it right again.

Back to Isaiah 6! "Woe is me! For I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips living in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Isaiah describes what happens next: "One of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And with it he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.'" It is the unclean lips over which Isaiah is despairing. It is the unclean lips that are touched with the live coal. Dross is consumed by fire.

Isaiah says the coal came from the altar within the temple. That's where lambs were sacrificed and burned, as a substitute for the death of the sinner. Hebrews 9, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (v. 22).

Already 700 years before Christ, Isaiah was able to see how the Lord would make forgiveness happen. Isaiah 53, "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Is. 53:7). He was silent for us who cannot hold our tongues when we should, or stop our thumbs. Even up there on the cross, in horrific agony, while others ridiculed him, yet nothing came unchecked out of his mouth. The transcription of his words needs no editing. He neither hisses nor strikes, nor injects venom. Instead, he prays: "Father, forgive them." And he bleeds, so there can be forgiveness.

"One of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And with it he touched my mouth and said, 'Behold . . . your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.'" "With that" Luther wrote, "our sacraments are established. We have the visible means of grace: the coal. And we have the Word: "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

John of Damascus, one of the Early Church Fathers,

wrote: “Let us partake of the divine coal . . . It is not plain wood but wood united with fire. In like manner also the bread of communion is not plain bread but bread united with divinity” (Quoted from The Lutheran Study Bible, p. 1098).

So the seraph touched Isaiah’s lips with the coal. Here, what touches your lips is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Thanks be to God! Amen.

