Last week we concluded with the prayers where we spoke to God. We called him to give us strength and patience and wisdom. We called him to empower us to overcome the challenges in our lives and we thanked him for the grace and forgiveness he bestows upon us. Now as we approach the second peak in the Divine Liturgy, stand back, because God is about to act again – but this time not just with words, but with action.

The Service of the Sacrament is our most powerful encounter with God this side of paradise. So the pastor prepares you for what is to come with the Preface. As the Service of the Word began so too does the Service of the Sacrament by proclaiming Jesus’ presence with us. The Pastor says the Lord be with you and you respond likewise to him.

Then the pastor says something unique in the liturgy. He encourages you to lift up your hearts. And you respond, we lift them up unto the Lord. For just a moment we try to put everything else out of our minds. We forget about all the work that needs doing. We forget about unrest in the Middle East and world hunger. We forget about our jobs. And for just a moment, we are drawn up into the Lord’s arms. For just a brief moment, the Lord takes us into his arms and reminds us that all of this is transitory. Northing of the world lasts except our relationship with him and our relationships with each other. That’s it. Our money will be spent and our buildings will fall down and our businesses will close but our relationship with God is forever and therefore our relationships with one another are forever. That’s why hope, faith and love abide but the greatest of these is love. Love is forever.

The pastor moves forward, “Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.” The holy supper is also called “The great Thanksgiving,” a meal in which we gather at the Lord’s
Table, called the altar, where we rejoice and give thanks, and celebrate our salvation with a meal and simultaneously receive strength for our faith.

The Pastor then speaks the Proper Preface. In worship there are propers and there are ordinaries. Propers are words or songs that change with the day or the season. So for instance, the collect of the day is a proper because it changes every week to the one that is proper for that week. Ordinaries are the things that stay relatively the same week in and week out. In other words – they are ordinary, regular, unchanging. The Kyrie, for example, is an ordinary. So the Proper Preface is the preface that is attached to the particular season in which we are worshiping. So it changes with the liturgical season.

Right now, we are in Epiphany. So the Proper Preface speaks of Jesus appearing to us in flesh so that we might understand more about God. Here in the Lord’s Supper, Jesus is as clearly in the flesh as he will ever be until the day of the resurrection when we see him again in bodily form.

At the end of the Proper Preface we sing a very important part of the liturgy. It is the Sanctus. Remember, we have been ascending the second peak of the liturgy. We are headed toward the reception of the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. As we make our way up the mountain we remember the time when the Lord was revealed to Isaiah, the Prophet.

We sing the words of the Sanctus which hearken back to the call of Isaiah. Listen to Isaiah 6.

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 above him were seraphs, 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."
At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"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."

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

Isaiah found himself face to face with the Lord God Almighty and he was terrified. There he was, just an ordinary man standing in the temple of God looking upon strange angel beings called seraphim. The seraphim called out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” And their voices were so powerful that the building shook.

Isaiah thought he was in deep trouble because he was a sinful man and was suddenly looking upon the holy God. Like us, unworthy and sinful, he stood before the altar knowing that he had no sacrifice great enough to pay for his sins.

That is the point of the Sanctus. As we sing it, we stand in Isaiah’s shoes and see that they fit quite nicely. Like Isaiah, you have lived a sinful life this week. You have made choices that go against God. You have shown disrespect to authority. You have gossiped about others. You have taken God’s name in vain. You have squandered your time, money and talents instead of offering your first and best to God. How dare you come to this altar? How dare I come to this altar?

But then the seraph flew down and took a burning coal from God’s high altar and touched Isaiah’s lips with it. He was made clean. All his guilt and all his sin was taken
away. It was that simple. Or was it? It was simple for Isaiah. One moment he was sinful and the next he was pure and holy. But it was not so simple for Jesus. That burning offering on God’s altar was the Lord Christ. And Isaiah’s forgiveness cost him his soul as did your forgiveness and my forgiveness.

When we sing the Sanctus, we look upon the altar and we see the bread and the wine ready for its holy service. The elements are prepared so that the true body and blood of Jesus Christ will move in with and under them. And we will be made holy; not by anything we have done. Not by any amount of right living or right teaching or right choices, but purely and simply by the Grace of God. Just as Isaiah dumbly stood there as the seraph did all the work, so we come forward to receive that which we do not truly understand and did not earn, but which our faith craves and desperately needs.

What do I do to receive this? We don’t do anything. It is pure gift headed straight for us. It is unworldly power bearing down on us like a runaway locomotive and it is all gift, nothing we have to do, not even anything we can do. All we could do is reject the gift, and why on earth would we reject pure grace, pure love and pure power?

Next week we finish our series on the Divine Liturgy as we receive the gift and bring the service to a close with God’s last word in the Benediction. Amen.