

A few months ago, Manda Alexander of San Antonio, TX, received quite a shock. It had been a whole year since her and her husband, Vincent Alexander, had had their wedding. And now they were celebrating their first anniversary together, which you might know is the “paper anniversary.” So, being the thoughtful guy that he is, Vincent gifted Manda appropriately with a framed picture from their wedding day. “When I first opened the gift,” Manda recalls, “I was opening it from right to left so all I saw was Vince and I in this beautiful frame [. . .] then [. . .] I saw the clown.”

Yup, that’s right folks, the way this thing looks—there’s Vincent and Manda looking picture perfect in front of an old rustic barn . . . all the while, unbeknownst to Manda, there lurking in the background is a menacing clown wielding a long kitchen knife. You can just imagine her initial surprise finding out a year later that a killer clown had been photobombing her wedding pictures the whole time. As Manda puts it, I was “in complete shock.”

You see, when they were first planning their wedding together, Vincent had originally wanted a clown to entertain their guests during the cocktail hour of the reception—y’know, just twisting balloons and making jokes—but Manda wasn’t a fan of that idea at all. So after seeing his bride-to-be’s repulsion to clowns, Vincent just couldn’t help himself. He hatched a plan to have his younger brother, Matthew, dress up in a clown costume complete with knife, and make a few secret appearances during their photo shoot. Just imagine if it was your wedding day, and you have Stephen King’s “It” there the entire time without ever knowing it.

That’s something like what happens to the prophet Isaiah this morning. Now, we don’t know much about young Isaiah before this episode. We don’t know what he was really doing there at the temple—perhaps his mother dragged him to church that day. He may’ve been checking his watch to make sure he got home before the opening kick-off, he may’ve been yawning during the choral anthem (Bach just wasn’t his bag), he might’ve even been nodding off during the sermon, we don’t know. But whatever he was doing, this is what we do know—like Manda, Isaiah was also in “complete shock.”

In a flash, the temple veil was lifted before him, and Isaiah got to peer into the deepest parts of the Holy of Holies, where He could look upon God in all of His glory. Had this been just a vision, just some glimpse of a far-off heavenly realm, the young prophet might not have been so startled. Had that been the case, at least there would’ve been some miles between him and the Almighty God. But instead, Isaiah reports, he quickly found out what kind of mysteries had been lurking around in that temple all along. Right under his nose, Isaiah discovered, the Lord was ever present on His Mercy Seat right there in Jerusalem—Isaiah, after all, tells us that the train of His robe filled the *temple*. And not only that, but when the angels call out, “Holy, holy, holy,” they say that “the whole earth[—not just some distant heaven, but *earth*—]is full of His glory!” Isaiah even says that the foundations of the thresholds shook, and the whole house of the Lord was filled with smoke—probably from all the incense the priests had been burning.

Well, talk about a shock! “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” the Bible says. And God Himself told Moses, “No man can see Me and live.” So how do you think Isaiah should react? Joy? Peace? Comfort? No, naturally when Isaiah first sees the Lord, he cries out in fear. “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!” I mean, here’s a sight that can blow you to bits, turn you inside out, be the very death of you—so little wonder Isaiah is anything but calm.

Now, unbeknownst to us, there’s more going on in this place than meets the eye. Right here, right now, it’s just like Isaiah says—God is in His house. In Isaiah’s day, God called Jerusalem home, taking up residence there among His people—but in the book of Revelation He lists His change of address as the Church, which He now calls the “New Jerusalem.” Remember, Jesus promises, “Wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in the midst of them.” And as two or three . . . or four . . . or more are gathered in His name around this altar, here He is in flesh and blood, just as He promised.

That's what's going on behind the scenes in a place like this. If the veil of our reality were to be stripped away, you and I would see for ourselves exactly what Isaiah saw. It would be no different—God is seated before us, even as we speak, high and lifted up; the train of His robe filling *this* temple. Right in front of our faces, the very same angels and archangels and all the company of heaven that surprised Isaiah now worships with us, even if we didn't know it. Which is why, of course, we join in their "Holy, holy, holy" chorus every time the Lord takes His seat on the throne of this altar—we'll sing it again in just a little while. And after learning that, maybe like Manda, and maybe like Isaiah, when we discover what's been lurking around in this place the entire time, we find *ourselves* in "complete shock."

I mean, how else should we react? Wouldn't *you* cry out in fear—hyperaware of God's holiness and your . . . well, unholiness? Would you think you were lost, would you come completely undone—"Woe is me! For I am a person of unclean lips? Woe is me! For I am a person of unclean . . . hands? Unclean . . . eyes? Unclean . . . ears? Unclean . . . heart?" When confronted with an all-seeing, all-knowing God, how could you *not* react that way?

One of my favorite images of all time is that classic aerial shot of the *Christ the Redeemer* statue that overlooks Brazil. It's this giant 98 foot tall, 700 ton Jesus, looking down on Rio de Janeiro. And while those eyes aren't real, just harmless unobtrusive concrete and soapstone, they can't help but remind us of the real, living Lord who does indeed see into the private lives of every person. Like Isaiah, the Brazilian people might be more than a little nervous knowing that Jesus is up there, looking over their shoulder. "Gee, did He really see me do that?" they might wonder. In fact, it's for that very reason the Catholic Circle of Rio proposed building the landmark in the first place—back in 1920, it was because of the perceived "Godlessness" in society at that time.

But interestingly enough, the purpose for erecting the statue wasn't to wag a giant finger at such "Godlessness." If they wanted to do that then they could've gone with one of the other proposed designs for the statue, perhaps the one where Jesus has a globe in His hands and a pedestal under His feet symbolizing the world. Had that been built, everyone would've looked up and seen their Mighty Judge, and maybe that would be enough to scare them straight. But, y'know, that's not the design they decided to go with. No, rather than just showing their Lord to the people living below, this group of Christians wanted to reveal something much, much more—they wanted to expose their fellow Brazilians to the very heart of God. Naming it *Christ the Redeemer*, the figure of Jesus stands not as Judge, but in the shape of a cross, the very instrument by which He had redeemed them. No finger-wagging, just reassuring open arms, ready to embrace them. See, the hope was that by being shown God's disposition toward them, the people couldn't help but love Him back. When the inhabitants looked up at their loving Lord, their hearts would be turned to Him and thus turned away from their "Godlessness."

So, as the curtain gets stripped away for Isaiah, as shocked as he is to see God on His throne, perhaps even more startling was finding out God's true disposition toward him. There Isaiah was, bracing himself for the worst, expecting full-well to meet his end, when no sooner had Isaiah made his confession than God absolved him. Leaving God's side, maybe even coming straight from the place of God's own heart, an angel is sent to Isaiah. And snatching up a burning coal from the altar—the place of sacrifice—the angel touches the prophet's unclean lips, and declares, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." In that moment, the veil covering the very heart of God was pulled back, and Isaiah got to see what had been there for him the whole time.

This morning, if our time in worship has begun as it did for Isaiah—with a behind the scenes look, and a "Woe is me!"—know that it'll also end just like it did for Isaiah. As you drop to your knees here before the Lord, crying out for mercy, what happens for Isaiah happens for you. A burning coal from the altar will soon touch your lips. It is still hot from God the Father's fiery wrath, coming straight from the altar of the cross. It is none other than the body and blood of your Savior, sacrificed for you. And along with Isaiah, *your* guilt is taken away, and *your* sin atoned for. Like the prophet, maybe all your assumptions about God will get stripped away, and you'll be even more "in shock" to discover the very heart that He *does* have for you. Just think, such love has been waiting for you all this time—did you know it?

So, do you still find the words of Isaiah's "Woe is me!" on your lips? That might've been our first reaction. But now, having been exposed to the deepest mysteries of God's own heart—having encountered such shocking, startling,

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surprising love—you just might find yourself reacting in a whole new way. Together with Isaiah, maybe instead you're blurting out, "Here I am! Send me."