

How Do We Worship?
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton
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Isaiah 6: 1-8

My old friend Wesley Baker used to use this passage to teach about worship. He said it's like when you meet someone on the street. You see them, and wave, "Hi!" They say, "Hello!" back to you. Then you shake hands, perhaps. After that, you both apologize for how long it's been since you communicated. "I meant to call you, but you know, things got in the way." The other person says, "I know. It's OK. Life gets busy!" And you are absolved of guilt. Then you share information about your lives. You learn the news. At the end of the encounter, you both make promises. "I *will* call you before a month passes," And you depart.

We have all had those kinds of encounters. We see a friend, an acquaintance on the street, and we have almost this exact conversation. Right?

Isaiah describes something of the same thing between God and the prophet in the temple. The only difference is that these are not two equals meeting each others. Let's look at the text in detail.

It begins:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. The year that king Uzziah died is 740 BC. He was named king as co-regent with his father, for a number of years. Then at the end of his life, he developed leprosy; at that time he ruled with his son. Even so, he was on the throne for more than fifty years. He is remembered as a good king. At that time, Isaiah saw the Lord in the temple. God was seated on a throne, higher than all the thrones and kings of this earth. The train of his robe filled the temple. This is a rare and powerful vision!

Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

Seraphim -that's the plural form - are angels. They fly around the Lord signing his praise. Even the angels cover their faces when they are with God. These are angels whose job it is to attend God, and yet they hide their faces! The song addresses God as "holy, holy, holy." The Greek Church has a hymn they sing every week called the Thrice-holy hymn. It is these same words! God is referred to this way, and it is appropriate for his Trinitarian greatness and glory! They sing that "the whole earth is full of his glory," just as the hem of his robe in Isaiah's vision filled the temple. Here the glory of the Lord fills not the temple, but the entire earth.

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. The very doors of the temple shook, so powerful were the seraphim's voices. They drown out all other voices and noise of this earth. The entire temple filled with smoke. The smoke from the incense that burned in the temple filled the entire building.

And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' Here we have the prayer of confession. Isaiah recognizes that he is in trouble. He has seen the Lord, yet he is a man of “unclean lips.” He has said and done and thought things that are sinful; yet he sees God. He is without hope, beyond hope. He is lost!

John Calvin starts off his Institutes of the Christian Religion with a recognition of the glory of God. Then he turns and points out that any recognition of this glory immediately shows us how impoverished and sinful we are. God's greatness shows us how far we are from greatness. God's glory shows us how pitiful our glory is. God's power and majesty show us how poor we are, how far from power. This is a powerful insight into Calvin's thought, and it derives specifically from passages like this one. Indeed, I am a man of unclean lips!

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' The seraph takes a coal from the altar and touches his lips, cleansing them of sin. God acts to forgive and forget his sin. The coal itself comes from the altar of incense or from the burnt offerings. What else can save us, but the work of Christ, represented by these offerings? Only Christ can forgive our sins. Here we see an example of that, from before he was born, yet from Christ nonetheless!

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' God calls out, asking who will obey him? Who is available to be sent? Who will do my will? The plural forms indicate the conversation God has among the Trinity: who will go for us? God of course, knows what he is going to do. He knows his plan. This was said partly to reveal to Isaiah what is needed.

And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

Isaiah responds, “here am I; send me!” He doesn't know what the mission entails, nevertheless he volunteers. You know, you should never volunteer until you know what the mission is. The last thing you should do is raise your hand when someone says, “I need a volunteer!” Yet this is what Isaiah does. Send me! He says. I will go for you!

How is this like worship?

Look at our worship. We begin with a vision of God. We want to see God “high and lifted up.” We bring our praises and adoration. We sing God's praises. That is how we start off our worship services.

Then we see that, as high as God is, we are that far down. We are far below him. We do not dare raise our eyes, much less our voices, in God's presence. And so we confess our sin. Now, there are people in the world who hate this confession. They say the church has put people down for so long, that we need to build people up. They say that this focus on our sin is a bad thing. Perhaps. But I believe we need to acknowledge our sin. We do things we shouldn't. Right? Now, that said, I also believe we don't need to dwell on it over and over. We confess our sin, and trust that Christ offers us forgiveness.

One time we had a woman who produced our bulletins. When she saw the “Litany of Assurance” one day, she called me and asked, “we aren't going to become one of those churches that won't confess our sin, are we?” I said, no, only for six weeks, during Easter. We do need to confess our sins!

I have a friend who says that, in a Presbyterian Church, when you hear “silent prayer” called for, you get eight seconds! That’s all! One woman said, “we need more than 8 seconds; I have a lot to confess.”

So we have the confession of sin followed by the assurance of pardon. We are reminded and remind one another that we are forgiven in the name of Jesus Christ!

Then we read scripture. This corresponds to the exchange of information in our street conversation. Scripture is read and proclaimed in our worship. Now, in the Reformed Tradition, this is emphasized to an extreme degree. Someone called our worship a “classroom without a blackboard.” In Calvin’s day there was very little preaching or explanation of what was going on. So he set out to correct that, and the pendulum swung a little more to the explanation side of things than it needed to, perhaps. Nonetheless, that is what we are doing here right now.

Calvin was right, I think, when he said that there should always be an exposition of scripture when we celebrate the sacrament. Even if it is very short, we should at least do something. In most cases, that is what we do.

In our worship, after the sermon, we respond: we sing. We say the Creed. We pray for each other and the world. We celebrate sacraments. All of that corresponds to “Here am I; send me!”

If you keep reading in Isaiah, you will see that God gives Isaiah unsettling news. Israel is going to be destroyed. They won’t hear this message, though, no matter how he says it. They will hear and not listen. They will not change their ways. Several metaphors are used, which make Isaiah’s job pretty hard. But he volunteered, so now he is sent forth to proclaim his message, however unpalatable it may be for the folks who hear it.

That of course is one of the problems of preaching: people don’t really want to hear what you may have to say! You’d prefer it if I told a couple of humorous stories and gave you some home-spun advice. But sometimes, one has to proclaim the word of the Lord! And it isn’t always fun! I always say, if you are going to step on toes, make sure you include everyone, and step hard!

So we are sent forth, to battle, to fight the good fight, to proclaim the truth about God and God’s love for the world in his son Jesus.

And so you see, this pattern in Isaiah is the pattern for our worship, our interactions with God. We encounter God and we see him, great and terrible, but also loving and merciful. We are forgiven, loved, and freed. We are accepted and cherished for who we are. God has created us, and calls us to him, then sends us forth with work to do, a message to proclaim. This is who we are and how it is when we come to God in worship!

Thanks be to God! Amen.