

17 September 2017

Intentional Worship
Isaiah 6:1-10

The prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem tells how God called him to prophesy. That calling account is found in Isaiah chapter 6. It all started when Isaiah went to church one day . . . we read verses 1-10.

6 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. ²Seraphs 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. ³And one called to another and said:

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

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And 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!' ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The 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.' ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' ⁹And he said, 'Go and say to this people:

*"Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand."
¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.'*

So this month we're talking about the purpose of the church, and part of that involves examining some of the things that the church does and asking, "Why?" We begin with an obvious one: worship. Whatever else a church does, it *always* has a time and place for a worship gathering. That service is the primary contact most people have with the church – for some, the only contact – so much so that when we say "go to church," we mean "go to the weekly worship service." But why do we do this? What is the purpose of "worship"? It's not immediately obvious when you look at what we actually do, because this hour is kind of a hodgepodge. Is the purpose of the worship service mutual support and fellowship? Because that happens. Or is it an emotional pick-me-up? That can happen, too. Or to provide intellectual stimulation? That also can take place, theoretically. So is our Sunday morning time just a catch-all time? Or is there a single purpose? Why are we even here this morning?

Let me offer you a hypothesis: let's assume that the purpose of our worship gatherings is to help people experience the presence of the living God, both individually and in community. But how do we measure that? What does that entail? What does it mean to come into the presence of God? Well, let's look at what it meant to Isaiah in the narrative we just heard. *In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.* And then Isaiah describes a transcendent experience. He saw smoke and lights and strange creatures and heard voices and felt the earth shake. So the first thing we note is that he was confronted by something beyond his comprehension and overwhelmed. We call this, *mystery*. Second, in the presence of this mystery, this reality beyond the usual reality, Isaiah was terrified. Seeing the transcendent made him realize how insignificant and unworthy he was: *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!* But third, even as he trembles before the mystery, he is fascinated by it, drawn to it, cleansed by it and when a voice says, *Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*, Isaiah eagerly cries out, *Here am I! Send me!*

That, in a nutshell, is what the encounter with God involves: being overwhelmed with mystery, trembling with awe, and yet being cleansed and filled with joyful purpose. This is the experience we seek when we pray for God's presence among us. Now, obviously, it isn't always going to happen as intensely as it happened to Isaiah, thank God. Even to Isaiah, it only ever happened like that once. But we can taste of the same mystery, fear, and joy. Isaiah lost himself entirely in his experience of God's mystery, and that may not happen to us, but we can lose some of our selves, knowing better the reality beyond our own petty projects, and drawing closer to it.

So, if that's what worship is supposed to be like, we have to ask, how has the Church been doing? Have the Church's worship services historically been anything like that? Well, maybe at first, sometimes. From the New Testament and the writings of the early church, we know that worship in the earliest days involved gathering to read scripture, to listen to the "president" of the congregation speak, to raise prayers of thanks and confession, to partake of the Eucharist, to receive an offering for the widows and orphans, and to sing "spiritual songs." The Eucharist – Communion – was served in every service and is the primary expression of mystery. The prayers of confession represent humility and trembling before God, and the thanksgiving, the offering for the vulnerable, and the singing together sort of embody the "Here am I! Send me!" joy of the forgiven. So this pattern, which was already established by the second century, at least acknowledged each element of experiencing the presence of God.

Yeah. So here's what the Church has done since. First of all, it took that pattern and codified it, making it rigid and inflexible, writing it out and dictating exactly how it had to be done, and voila, you have the Mass. The problem is that when you codify and mandate an experience, you kill the experience: like having a great date with your significant other and then trying to recapture that experience by always doing exactly the same thing every time you go out. When the worship service came to be about doing things exactly the same way, it became a burden and a duty. A successful worship service was not one in which God was experienced but one in which all the boxes got checked. The best illustration of this is the Latin Mass. When the service was first written out it was, of course, done so in the language that people used: Latin. But as the centuries passed and Latin faded out of common use, the worship service continued using the language because, by God, that's what the book said. It didn't matter that no one understood it; it was what you did. There was no awe, no joy, and even the mystery of the Eucharist was downgraded to a magic act in which the priest said the magic words – *hocus pocus* – and changed a wafer into a forgiveness pill, good for one week. (By the way, I'm not joking

about the “magic words” thing. That’s where “hocus pocus” comes from: it’s a mispronunciation of the Latin *hoc est corpus*, or “this is the body.”) And the purpose of worship was lost.

Well, that’s those Catholics. But we Protestants fixed all that, right? Meh. Here’s what we did. Rejecting the empty ritualism and magic formulas that had come to define worship, we put everything back in the language of the people. That was good. Then we changed the focal point of the worship service from the Eucharist to the sermon. (That’s why most Protestant churches have the pulpit in the center, not the altar.) But that shift brought its own problems. When you make the sermon the center, you also elevate the status of the preacher. People began to go to church to hear the preacher instead of to encounter God. Meanwhile, the primary representative of mystery, Communion, got dropped to once a month, even sometimes once a quarter. Prayers of confession became optional – okay for Lent, but depressing the rest of the year. The typical Protestant worship service became a lecture preceded by a dreary hymn sing, and the measure of a successful worship service was not whether the worshiper was aware of the presence of God but rather whether he enjoyed the sermon. And the purpose of worship was lost.

In our own day we’ve seen a new worship experiment, the so-called “contemporary worship” scene, which began as a reaction against that dreary Protestant lecture format. Contemporary churches replaced the old hymns with choruses written in the 80s, which were performed by rock bands while the congregation stood and tried to sing along from lyrics projected on the wall. And this experiment did much good. It injected some energy into the stale worship scene and drew some Baby Boomers back to church. But even in its short lifetime, the contemporary worship scene has shown its weaknesses. By modeling itself on the secular rock concert so as to attract a younger crowd, it slipped too easily into having the same purposes as a rock concert – to draw crowds and entertain them, which if you’ll recall is not how we defined the purpose of worship. Besides, “contemporary” worship isn’t working like it used to. It turns out that choruses from the 80s aren’t “contemporary” any more, and the children of the Baby Boomers are *not* attracted to their parents’ designer worship services. In one of the most fascinating new developments in worship history, millennial Christians today are often turning to the formal liturgies of Catholic or Episcopal worship.

There you have it: a brief history of how the Christian Church has done everything imaginable to make it harder to experience God in worship. We sucked life from worship by making it empty, meaningless, formulaic ritual performed out of duty. We removed God by making worship about our own intellectual or emotional stimulation, and we’ve turned it into a marketing tool for reaching a target demographic. But here’s the good news. As hard as we’ve tried, we have not kept people from encountering God in worship. That has continued to happen, because the key factor in experiencing God is not something that *we* do but rather is the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit, and she goes where she wants to, even sometimes to church.

But just imagine what it would be like if people could have transformative encounters with the living God *through* worship services instead of in spite of them. What are some things that we could do to foster the sense of mystery, awe, and joyous commitment that we saw in Isaiah’s experience? No, we can’t force people to have a certain experience – that’s called emotional manipulation, and it is *not* worship – but how could we create spaces where the Spirit is set free to move, where people actually *expect* something more than entertainment or teaching? I don’t have those answers, but I wanted to raise the question – on the yellow insert in your bulletin. When have you known the mysterious presence of God? Has it ever been in

church? What could we do in our worship services to clear the path for that to happen again? I want to hear from you, both on those cards and, for a few minutes after worship in the Fellowship Hall.

We may change some things in our worship pattern, but even if we don't, can we at least remind ourselves why we do them? It's not about entertainment or performance or our preferences; it's not about us at all.

In the year of Nelson Mandela's death, let us see the Lord, lofty and exalted, and let the glory of his presence fill the sanctuary. Woe to us, for we are weak and stained with sin. But here are we. Send us. Amen.