

Because Christians Are To Worship

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

February 1, 2009

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Psalm 96:1-9 (The Message)

Sing GOD a brand-new song!
Earth and everyone in it, sing!
Sing to GOD—*worship* GOD!

Shout the news of his victory from sea to sea,
Take the news of his glory to the lost,
News of his wonders to one and all!

For GOD is great, and worth a thousand Hallelujahs.
His terrible beauty makes the gods look cheap;
Pagan gods are mere tatters and rags.

GOD made the heavens—
Royal splendor radiates from him,
A powerful beauty sets him apart.

Bravo, GOD, Bravo!
Everyone join in the great shout: Encore!
In awe before the beauty, in awe before the might.

Bring gifts and celebrate,
Bow before the beauty of GOD,
Then to your knees—everyone worship!

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

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!”

With all Christians, United Methodists join together in the worship of our Lord. We hold that worship is “an encounter with the living God through the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹ The prophet Isaiah had just such an encounter himself and it has shaped our worship ever since.

Worship of the Lord God Almighty has always been central in the relationship between God and his people. Today’s passage from Isaiah 6 is a good place to start in understanding how and why we worship as we do. The scene in Isaiah 6 is the heavenly throne room, with God surrounded by the celestial court. In one of his sermons, W. Maynard Pittendreigh, a Presbyterian minister, draws out five principles from this passage that I think you’ll find helpful.

Isaiah the Prophet

After the death of King Solomon in 921BC, the kingdom of Israel split in two. There was a northern Kingdom, called Israel, and a southern kingdom, called Judah. Isaiah was a prophet in Judah and lived about 700 years before Jesus. The book of Isaiah is a collection of teachings and writings that was compiled and edited over several centuries. Sometimes we misunderstand the role of prophets among God’s people, thinking of them in much the same way as we think of Nostradamus! Instead, the prophets were men who brought God’s word to God’s people, calling the people back to God and God’s way.

¹From the UMC *Book of Worship*

1. *“True worship is not an escape from reality.”* Notice how Isaiah 6 begins with this: “In the year that King Uzziah died, . . .” The death of a king was about the biggest event there could be in an ancient kingdom. This statement is not merely marking the

Making Sense of Isaiah

Few Old Testament books have shaped our Christian faith as has Isaiah. It is a wonderful and eye-opening experience to read Isaiah, but it isn't always easy. Getting the “flow” and the “big picture” are hard. Here are a few keys that will help.

First, Isaiah is most likely the work of two authors. The first 39 chapters date back to the prophet Isaiah himself and are set in the context of Judah as it is being threatened by Assyria in the late eighth-century BC. But chapters 40-66 are the work of a prophet during the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC, Israel's darkest days. Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66 are books within a book. You'll even find them referred to sometimes as First and Second Isaiah. I can virtually guarantee you that if you read the opening verses of Second Isaiah (chapter 40) as words written to a people who had lost everything at the hands of the Babylonians, your heart will be moved.

Second, you will be surprised how much of Isaiah you already know and how much of Christ you will find. Some call it the most Christ-filled book in the OT. George Frideric Handel went to Isaiah 40 to open his glorious oratorio *Messiah*. The chorus, “For Unto Us a Child is born” is from Isaiah 9. When Jesus rose in his hometown of Nazareth to begin his public ministry he asked for the scroll of Isaiah and opened it to chapter 61. He shocked the crowd by announcing that the words were fulfilled in their hearing on that day (see Luke 4). When you come to Isaiah 53, you'll see that it is a summary of Jesus' ministry and his sacrificial death. It isn't hard to imagine a young Jesus finding answers to his purpose and vocation in the words of Isaiah 53.

Third, try to avoid seeing Isaiah as little more than a pile of “predictions.” Instead, see it as a collection of word-pictures from God that help us to understand God, ourselves, and God's faithfulness to his promises to renew and restore his creation. It is a large drama that is played out in this prophetic work.

chronology of Isaiah's vision, it reminds us that we are to bring the “real world” into worship with us. The worship of God needs to be integrated into the rest of our life, not separated from it. We can bring it all into worship with us – all the worries, all the anxieties, all the fears – and we might well find that we can leave a large part of it behind when we leave. God can take these burdens from us. God wants to.

2. *“True worship focuses on God.”* In his vision, Isaiah sees God sitting on his throne, arrayed in royal garments. It is God who is at the center, not Isaiah. But is this really like our own understanding of worship. Have you ever heard someone say “I wasn't fed today” or “I didn't go to worship this week, I'm just not getting enough out of it.” Of course, we do desire to be fed and we do seek transformation in worship . . . BUT . . . worship is about God, not ourselves. God is the “audience.” The better question would be, “Did I feed God today?”

3. *“True worship always begins with an awareness of God's holiness.”* Yes, we have a friend in Jesus, but God is not our “buddy.” The seraphs in Isaiah's vision sing “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts and the whole earth is full of his glory.” “Holiness” is the word we use to name God's quintessential nature, distinguishing God from his creation. To the extent that people or places or things are “holy,” it is only because God has deemed them to be. We stand in awe of God's holiness. We fall on our knees before God's holiness. When we come to worship God, we may need to remind ourselves that we come to worship the Holy LORD God. Architecture, music, and ritual may serve to help us, but regardless of the place or the time or the circumstances, true worship begins with this awareness of God's holiness.

4. “True worship helps us to understand our shortcomings and embrace God’s forgiveness.” In his vision, Isaiah is overwhelmed by his unworthiness to come before God saying, “Woe is me. I am lost.” Isaiah has unclean lips and yet he is beholding God. True worship will help us to embrace that we need to be forgiven, that we need God’s grace. At the 9:30 Teaching Service, we include a Prayer of Confession in the order of worship. It is the moment when we lift up to God our own awareness of our failures to love God and neighbor. But also remember that each week we include the Assurance of Pardon, the word of forgiveness for a sinful people. One of the seraphs touches Isaiah’s unclean lips with a hot coal, burning them clean as it were. The Apostle John put it this way: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

Applying the Old Testament

Both of today’s Scripture passages are drawn from the Old Testament. Many Christians find it challenging to apply the OT to their lives. Here are a few general principles that may help.

1. *The Old Testament gives us an unflinchingly realistic look at life!*

Too often, we want to compartmentalize our lives, separating the “church stuff” from the “real world” where we have to compete and make a living. For the Israelites, there was no such separation. God, YHWH, was a part of every aspect of their lives, or at least he was supposed to be! In the covenant between God and his people recorded for us in Deuteronomy, the laws of (i.e., instruction to) Israel extended from how they were to worship to how they were to marry to how they were to plant their fields. Because the covenant touched every part of their lives, the story of the covenant is a realistic look at life, all of its joys and sorrows, hope and despair, health and suffering. There is nothing “ivory tower” or “utopian” about the Old Testament. All of the messiness of life is confronted in its pages and we ought to take comfort from that as we work through the messiness of our own lives.

(cont. in the page 4 text box)

5. “True worship motivates us to roll up our sleeves and get to work.” After his lips were touched by the hot coal, Isaiah hears God’s voice asking, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah’s response was simple, direct, and ought to be ours as well, “Here I am, send me!” Jesus reminds us that the worshiping of God is bound up with serving God. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the devil showed him the whole earth promising “All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.” Jesus replied by quoting from the Hebrew scriptures (Deut 6:1), “Worship (*proskyneo*) the Lord your God, and serve (*latreou*) only him.” (see Matthew 4:1-11) In the New Testament, *latreou* is most often translated “serve,” but is translated “worship” more than a dozen times!² Why? Because serving God is worshiping God and worshiping God ought to be our call to service, just as it was Isaiah’s.

In the New Testament, *latreou* always denotes service rendered to God, whether it is in a ministry of prayer (e.g., Acts 26:7), missionary work (2 Cor 8:18), or simply the service to God rendered by leading a righteous life (see Phil 3:3).³ This is why you’ll sometimes hear Christians say things like “Our mission trip was an act of worship.” They are right. We acknowledge God’s glory and worth when we serve him. Worship includes our prayers and praise songs, but it is so much more!⁴

Let us worship God!

² For example, Luke 2:37, Acts 7:7, Acts 24:14, Philippians 3:3, and Rev 7:15

³ From Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

⁴ One last observation. In the first centuries after Jesus, Christians stopped using the word *proskyneo* for worship because it was also used by pagans in reference to the worship of their gods. Instead, when referring to their own worshiping of the one true God, Christians used only the Greek word for serving, *latreou*.

Applying the Old Testament

(continued from the page 3 textbox)

2. We can be completely honest with God!

One of the most striking aspects of the Old Testament is the writers' willingness to be completely honest with God. They were willing to be angry with God. They could be despairing. At times, they even seemed to give up on God. But God was always there. He was relentless in his pursuit of and love for his people. God may not have always told them what they wanted to hear or answered all their questions (remember Job!), but he was always there. We need not be afraid to take the worst part of ourselves to God or the toughest times of our lives.

3. We are called to obedience as we make our journey of the heart!

In the history of the Christian church, we've had a tendency to separate what we believe from what we do. Many Christians have seen the Old Testament as a book of the Law, filled with all sorts of old rules that have no meaning for us, while they see the New Testament as a book of the heart. Sometimes this is expressed by seeing the OT as a Book of the Law and the NT as a book of Grace. But this is a misleading separation. In the OT, God saved the Israelites by his grace. Abraham was reconciled to God by his faith (the test of Isaac's sacrifice). The whole point of the book of Job is Job's heart – his motivation. Even though David committed some of the most horrible of deeds, God still looked to David's heart. Throughout the OT, God wants his people's love and extends his own love to them freely. In the New Testament, the first large section of Jesus' teachings is the Sermon on the Mount, which plays the same role in the new covenant as Moses' sermons did in the old covenant. Jesus too focused on the heart, but he also issued a call for obedience. Just as the covenant in Deuteronomy showed the Israelites how they were to live in covenant with God, the Sermon on the Mount instructs us on how we are to live in covenant *with* God in the kingdom of God. If you would like to read more on this, I'd suggest reading *The Truth about God*, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. For the authors, the Ten Commandments are not guidelines for humanity in general. Instead, they are a "countercultural way of life for a certain people to know a certain God, the God of Jesus Christ."

4. We are part of the people of God!

Finally, it is worth remembering that we are part of God's people, a people first chosen 4,000 years ago. Our charge is the same as that of Israel – we are to be the light to the world, a witness to the one, true God in a world chasing frantically after gods of all sorts!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Reflect upon and discuss the parallels between Isaiah's vision of God and the worship services in which you've participated, here at St. Andrew and elsewhere. Can you see the tension between worship services that would seem to more directly reflect the sense of Isaiah's vision and those that are simpler, focusing on preaching and the common fellowship. How might we be able to carry these five worship principles into a variety of worship styles? What really makes a worship service a "worship service?" When would a "worship service" stop being "worship" and become merely a "meeting" or a "class?" These are not easy questions and Christians certainly don't agree. If you compare a Greek Orthodox service with a Quaker meeting, you'll quickly see the tensions and differing perspectives. Do you see in Methodist worship services an effort to hold these two poles together, creating a place where Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists can meet not only in a common theology but in an approach to worship that is somewhat familiar to both? How well do you think we do at finding the middle way?

2. Isaiah was a prophet. John the Baptist was a prophet. Jesus was a prophet. When we use the term "prophet" what comes to mind? In the page one text box, I suggest that we shouldn't think of biblical prophets in the same way we think of Nostradamus. What do you think I mean by this? What was the mission of biblical prophets? Should we really think of Jesus as a prophet? Do you think there are modern-day prophets? How might they differ from biblical prophets? If you have a Bible dictionary, you might read the entry on prophets.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 8:20-22 Noah worships</p>	<p>Tuesday, Leviticus 16 The ritual of the Day of Atonement when sacrifice was made for the sins of Israel</p>
<p>Wednesday, Micah 6:6-8 What does God require of us?</p>	<p>Thursday, John 4:19-26 Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman about worship.</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 2:42-47 Life and worship in the first Christian community</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

