

Comprehending Worship

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 4:16-22a

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Nothing we do as the people of God, as the disciples of Jesus Christ, or as a community of faith matter more than our worship of the living God — why we worship, how we worship, and *whom* we worship. Worship is God's first expectation and requirement of his people in grateful response to his unmerited grace and goodness. Worship is not simply a choice, an option, even an opportunity. No, it is also a duty, an obligation, and an essential aspect of who we are and a critical factor of our life and work together as God's people. It is central to our witness, as well, both as individuals and as a corporate body.

With all this in mind I invite you to open your Bibles to *Isaiah 6* and let us think together about the nature of our worship.

A primary trait of our heritage in the Protestant and reformed faith concerns the way we worship. Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, William Farel, John Calvin and others objected to much of the worship of the church in their day and initiated sweeping changes. Superstitious and strange practices had entered into the worship experience of the church and the Reformers insisted that a worship be radically transformed according to the word of God and the practices of the early church. They maintained and taught that worship was to have Biblical and theological integrity (that is to say, there should be a warrant for what we do in the Bible and in the faith of the church), that it be simple (meaning absent of all pompous and theatrical abuses which glorify the human rather than the divine), that it be edifying (enabling both the church and the individual to be more Christ-like and not simply to be entertained or even informed), and lastly that it be intelligible, understandable, comprehensible.

It is this last criterion of intelligibility that I wish to deal with this morning. In worship we need to know what we are doing and why we are doing it. This insistence needs to be sounded over and over again because far too many people go through the ritual of corporate worship with little, if any, understanding of the rhythm, the logic, and the theology that informs the order of worship itself. There may be many things in the life that we can do by rote, as it were, without conscious thought – but the worship of the living God should never be one of these. No, our worship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit must always be intentional and intelligible.

Nevertheless, if you were to review the orders of worship in many different congregations you would find that often they have been thrown together like a real hodge-podge with no criteria informing the worship other than the whims of the people or the personal preferences of the preachers or the musicians. Or even worse, they have been put together simply for utilitarian purposes and are intended to meet the demands of convenience. Therefore, we take up the offering early in the service so that the Deacons can have it counted by the time church ends. Or, we place the sermon last because if we are running overtime the preacher can always cut the message short and we will be able to catch the kick-off for the day's NFL game. The only

focus is what meets our needs, what suits our preferences, not what honors and best serves our God.

Surely there are more compelling reasons for why and how we worship God. And perhaps if you understand what some of those reasons are you will better be able to offer your heartfelt worship of God.

So today I want us to examine our worship here. Let us begin by looking at the top of the Order of Worship and you will see that the bulletin indicates which Sunday this is according to the Liturgical Calendar of the Christian year, such as the *Fifth Sunday of Easter*. We continue in *Easter tide* until we reach the day of Pentecost on June 9th this year. There are still some Presbyterians who are neither familiar with nor accustomed to the seasons of the Church year including Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter Tide, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time. What many of them do not realize is that the Christian year formerly had a place of prominence in Presbyterianism and it was only through the influence of the Puritans that this part of our heritage was set aside for a while, at least not in this county. It is not simply out of an ecumenical commitment that we have rediscovered the liturgical calendar of the Christian year. Nonetheless there are many Puritans hiding in the wings and many of us grew up in churches that seldom referred to seasons of the year. The Puritans discouraged celebration of Christmas or Easter since these were not scriptural terms. Neither did they like organ music or stained-glass windows and their worship tended to be rather joyless and colorless. Mind you, the Puritans had many wonderful characteristics, which we would do well to emulate but I would not consider their forms of worship one of their strengths.

So the designation of the particular Sunday of the Christian year reminds us of our Christian festivals and also calls to remembrance the various episodes in the life of Christ from his announced coming to his birth, life, death, resurrection, and descending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Christ's ascension and finally his return as King of Kings.

Now we come to the beginning of corporate worship itself, or what we call the Service of the Lord's Day. Our particular order of worship is based on a vision or experience of the prophet Isaiah when he was called to be a prophet according to the sixth chapter of the book that bears his name. Isaiah tells of going to the temple in the year that King Uzziah died and there being confronted by the living God. Four things happened in Isaiah's experience and we have thus divided our order of worship into four corresponding sections which give to it a sense of rhythm and logical progression.

To begin with, Isaiah has THE VISION OF GOD, Listen to verses 1 through 3.

¹In 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."

The prophet Isaiah is a spiritually sensitive man and in this experience within God's temple he becomes keenly aware of the divine reality present in worship. And my friends, so should we. It is the living God who personally encounters us as we worship and not the minister, the choir, or our fellow worshipers; therefore, it is imperative that we attune ourselves to God as

worship begins. In this section there will be an opening voluntary or prelude ordinarily brought to us by one of our musicians or choristers. Rather, the organist will select and offer pieces that have been carefully selected and diligently practiced to go with the season of the year or the character of worship or the needs of the congregation. While it is good to warmly greet those we see when we enter the place of worship, and there will be a time for that, it is also essential that we prepare our hearts and minds for worship. We are including a prayer each week to assist you. We should pray fervently for ourselves and for those who will be involved in the leadership of this service. We should not stumble into God's presence in a casual or cavalier manner.

Now the only thing that does not fit logically or comfortably in this or any order of worship is the time for welcome and announcements. We certainly hope that people feel welcome here and announcements are a regrettable necessity. But I would encourage you to read the bulletin so that the ministers have to spend less time reminding you of things you would probably already know if you read your newsletter or carefully reviewed the announcements in the bulletin.

The Call to Worship is ordinarily responsive and is always a passage chosen from scripture to fit the theme of the day, the season, or the theme of the day's worship. It is important to know that God always initiates worship. God calls or invites us to worship. We do not invite or call God to worship, we simply respond to his invitation.

As with the case with Isaiah and the temple, the first thing the believer should do when she or he realizes that they are in the presence of God is to praise and adore Him. In Isaiah's vision the angels joined him in a hymn of praise and adore Him. In Isaiah's vision the angels joined him in a hymn of praise and our first hymn is an expression of praise as well. Note that the hymn chosen this morning a classic favorite, is: "*Holy, Holy, Holly! Lord God Almighty!*" This hymn was chosen because it repeats some of the wording from our scripture lesson this morning and which occurs again in *Revelation 4*. Note as well that the opening prayer is called a Prayer of Adoration rather than an Invocation, again because we do not invoke God's presence but rather he invokes ours. God has already promised that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is present, so he is not awaiting our invitation.

The second portion of worship is called THE CONFESSION OF SIN. Listen to verses 4

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."

It is not true that whenever we become conscious of the Lord's nearer presence we also become more keenly aware of our sinfulness and our unworthiness? In the clearer light of God's presence, we see ourselves as we truly are, complete with all of our faults and imperfections, our proud pretensions and our destructive attitudes, our careless deeds and our willful rebellion. The light of God's presence allows us to see who we are and what we have become and thus, we are moved to ask a merciful God to forgive, to renew us and to remake us. Like Isaiah, we confess our corporate sins as well as our personal and private sins during a time of silence. Surely each

of us can say along with Isaiah: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man among unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” In those words, you find both corporate and personal confession.

After Isaiah confesses, one of the angels in his vision announces that his guilt has been taken away and his sin forgiven. And so it is our custom following the confession for the minister to give an *Assurance of Pardon* announcing and assuring that our sins too are taken away – not because the minister is performing some priestly function here, not because the minister has any special power or gift of insight, but simply because this is the promise of the gospel that sinful people can claim because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having been forgiven, we respond as a congregation in some appropriate way. The congregation or the choir will sing a choral response and then having been forgiven we will share the peace and forgiveness of Christ with our fellow worshippers, for those forgiven must also forgive.

The third movement in our worship service is central for Protestant worship in particular for it is here that the living God speaks to us through his word and communicates to us God’s will and purposes. It is simply called *THE WORD OF GOD*. After his Vision of God and after his Confession of Sin we read of Isaiah in verse 8.

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!”

When we enter the sanctuary for the purpose of worship it is not merely for the purpose of praising God, or receiving our needed pardon from God, but also to listen for and discover the will of God for us as a people and us as individuals. We have a *Prayer for Illumination* realizing that in order for us to hear, understand and obey the word of God the Holy Spirit must be at work within us. We need to ready ourselves to receive what God will be saying to us.

And how does God speak the word to us? God certainly speaks through the scriptures, the written word, so we read the word ordinarily from both the Old and the New Testaments. Passages that are carefully selected and will be interpreted through the sermon. An increasing number of Presbyterian ministers today preach from the common lectionary and focus on the passages suggested for the day. Typically, it has not been my custom to do this but rather I choose text based on what I feel led to deal with during a particular season or day. But the lectionary does suggest passages from the Hebrew scriptures, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Epistles for each Sunday of the year. After the reading of the lessons, there is the sermon for the day which might also be designated as the *Word Proclaimed*.

Historically, Protestants in general and Presbyterians in particular have centered their worship on the word of God. Following an old Scottish custom, the designated Beadle for the day leads the procession into the sanctuary carrying the Bible and places in in a prominent position. Even church architecture testifies to the centrality of the word with a large and elevated pulpit. A church’s architecture will tell you a great deal about its values and its priorities. In most traditional Catholic churches your focus is directed toward the altar because the mass of the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the central aspect of worship. In Catholic churches you may have to look hard to find a pulpit. By contrast, in Protestant churches you may have to look hard to find a communion table or baptismal font. The architecture focuses your eyes upon the place where the word is read and proclaimed. The focus on the Word read and proclaimed is our

heritage as Protestants. Going back to the days of Zwingli in Zurich and Farel and Calvin in Geneva, Reformed worship focused on the word of God and not the Eucharist.

The sermon is highly important and that is why we expect our clergy to be educated in college and seminary so that they might rightly interpret and present the word to the people. Done poorly, preaching can kill a church about as quickly as anything I know. Done effectively sermons continue to instill faith and to offer challenge and inspiration to the receptive listener. Consistent with the word, therefore, the preacher will at times admonish, or comfort, or challenge or encourage and even offer instruction, such as today's preacher is doing.

How else does God's word come to us? When we celebrate either *Sacrament of Baptism* or the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, you will notice that it is designated in the bulletin as the *Word Enacted*. That is the Protestant perspective on sacraments. They are visible presentations of some aspect of the Word of God through symbols of bread and wine and water. The sacraments are a part of the covenant community's life and therefore, only with rare exception, will we baptize someone or serve the *Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* outside of a corporate worship experience. Even when we do so, given very unusual circumstances, members of the church must be present to participate. The sacraments are a corporate act of worship and not an individual rite.

By the way, the primary change that the Christians brought to traditional Hebrew synagogue worship was the addition of the sacraments, especially the *Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*. Jesus himself never formulated a liturgy or order of worship so far as we know but it is clear from our New Testament Lesson that he freely entered in the traditional worship patterns of his own people and on a regular basis. Note that the synagogue worship service described in our morning lesson centered on the word of God as it was read and interpreted.

After the sermon or the sacrament, as the case may be, we proceed to the fourth and final aspect of worship as it is based on Isaiah's experience. And this is called *THE RESPONSE TO THE WORD*. After hearing the word from God, Isaiah responds: "Here am I; send me!" By the way, you might notice that our concluding hymn this morning is based on this passage.

The first way we respond to the word is by singing a hymn that deals either with the passage or with the theme of the sermon. Let me say just a word here about music and hymnody. Music always has been and always will be critically important in the worship of God. It has been so since the days of King David, and even before. Who will deny that sometimes God speaks to us most effectively through music, where his word can reach our emotions as well as our intellects? The music that our choirmaster and organist select for the anthem, introit, and responses and the hymns that we select are chosen very carefully. They serve an intended purpose. We work hard in planning worship to match the hymnody with the theme of the day and I would encourage you to look carefully to see what the connections are in order to sing intelligently as well as exuberantly.

How do we respond to hearing the Word of God in addition to singing a hymn? We profess our faith, ordinarily using one of the ancient or contemporary creeds of the church. Last century's greatest theologian, Karl Barth, wrote that the human response to the Word of God in preaching calls for some kind of public affirmation and so we confess what we believe as individuals and as a church. We then pray for ourselves and for one another and for the world in

our Prayers of the People which are concluded by the reciting of the Lord's Prayer together, the prayer which our Lord gave to his disciples as a pattern.

Yet another way we respond to the *Word of God* is by committing our lives and our resources, so we receive an offering. Are you aware that this contribution to the Order of Worship is born out of the American experience of worship? Offerings have always been a part of worship, but they were usually offerings to simply aid the poor and not to support the church. Peculiar American situation of a newly settled land and the separation of church and state contributed to the conviction that the church should be maintained by all the people. The church in the United States is somewhat unique in that it is maintained neither by the state, nor by wealthy landowners, nor by the nobility, nor by the rich, but by all the members as a body. The offering is the expression of this conviction. As the offering is being received, our wonderful choir with choirmaster and organist will lead us in an anthem chosen and rehearsed for the day. At its conclusion we stand and sing the Doxology as the gifts are brought forward and a Prayer of Dedication is offered.

Is it not imperative that we respond to the word once it is heard? Scripture tells us it is not the hearers of the word but the doers of the word who are justified in God's sight. Worship which fails to elicit a response from the worshipers, worship which fails to change the way we think and act, the way we relate to people and problems, the way we involve ourselves in the life of the church and the issues of the world – such worship is sterile and ineffective. When God meets us in worship, as was the case with Isaiah, he does so for a purpose. He meets us so that he might melt us, mold us, fill us, and use us. There is always a RSVP attached to the Word of God and to the worship of God so that when we really hear what God is saying to us then we are compelled to respond in a number of ways. It is my prayer as one of your preachers that when we leave the sanctuary from week to week we will not simply have been entertained by the choir or impressed by the preacher so much as we will have been inspired, equipped, challenged, and changed. In churches where this is happening in worship need not worry about attracting new members or engaging in mission, for people will come and Christ will be served by his changed and challenged people.

After the Prayer of Dedication of the offerings and of our lives we will sing a hymn of commitment and be sent on our way with the Charge and the Benediction and a choral and/or organ response and postlude.

Now I hope this overview of the how's and whys of worship has been helpful to you and will enable you to worship with greater comprehension and with greater appreciation for the time your staff invests in planning a coordinated service of worship that glorifies God and challenges God's people. Let me conclude by making one point that will probably offend some of you but must be understood above all else. Most modern-day worshippers do not grasp the truth of what I am about to say. Worship is not finally about you. It is about God. The propriety of worship does not rest on the beauty of the space, the style of the music, the skill of the musicians, the talent of the choristers, the eloquence of the preacher, the numbers in attendance, or the length of the service. These are not un-important, but neither are they of prime importance. What ultimately matters is whether our worship is "in spirit and in truth" according to Jesus.

We do not plan or should plan these services with a view toward how we can please the congregation but rather how we can honor God in accordance with God's own directions for what is appropriate. The congregation is not the audience for worship but rather God is the

audience and you are the participants and the performers. Our purpose is not to bless you but for you to bless God although we hope that will be a blessing to you as well. We cannot time every single aspect of the service so occasionally we may go over an hour slightly, but you will simply have to understand that. We dare not jeopardize the integrity of some aspect of worship simply so that you can get on with more important things in life. Like catching the kickoff of the Panther's game or beating the Baptists to the Sunday buffet line! There is nothing more important in the course of the week that you will do than to worship and praise and glorify the living God.

Some people come to worship wondering what they are going to get out of it and when they come with this mindset they are incapable of true worship. You should come into this sanctuary with a view toward what you can give and what you can offer to God in terms of your praise, your confession, your attentive listening, and your obedient response. If you do your part, God will do God's part and the by-product of your blessing God will be your experience of his grace.

One of the challenges before us during this time of transition is to revive our attitudes toward and our participation in the worship of God. We are challenging you to be more intentional and faithful in your worship practices and habits. We are exploring changes we can make because our attendance over the past ten years or so has gone from an average of over eight-hundred to less than five-hundred. We can't keep doing the same things and expect different results. It is time to risk doing some new things so that the worship of God will become a priority and a passion for us, so then we will continue to be challenged and changed ourselves and thus become God's change agents drawing future disciples into our fellowship. And into God's service.

Prayer: Eternal God, by your grace enable our corporate worship to assist us in seeing you more clearly, loving you more dearly, and following you more nearly, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.