

SERMONSECOND  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

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460 East Main Street

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*In Response to a Holy God*

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Maybe you've noticed, but the deity formerly described as Holy seems to have gone missing.

It's not that we no longer talk about God. We surely do. It's just that our language betrays how we have moved from speaking of a Holy God worthy of our ultimate allegiance and praise, a God whose demands on us are absolute, to speaking about God as our best friend, our cosmic buddy.

Edward Farley, a former theology professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, captured it well when he said: "No longer do we look to God and say, 'Holy, Holy, Holy'", says Farley. "Now we look at God and say 'Nice, nice, nice.'"

The prophet Isaiah certainly didn't understand God that way. When he entered the Temple and saw God high lifted up, Isaiah was swept into the story of God's holiness. And Isaiah discovers that he cannot completely live if he does not say what he has seen and heard from this Holy God who claimed him. He simply had to speak—even at the risk of being misunderstood, ignored, persecuted, or thought to be a fool.

Maybe you understand how Isaiah was feeling that day.

We live and work in a world that has forgotten the holiness of God. And it's not just the folks outside the church walls whose understanding of a Holy God is diminished. It's the church as well.

Yes, church and culture have turned the God who is wholly other into a kind and gentle chum who blesses our meager efforts, without calling for commitment of any sort—at least not the sort of which Isaiah speaks.

And, so, when you enter the sanctuary to worship you may believe that you enter a place vastly removed from your everyday world of bills and chores and taxes and responsibilities. And you may use this time to regain strength for more work. And then, at the end of our Sunday worship, when you exit the sanctuary you may honestly believe that you go back to the real world, and you may think back on this time as nothing more than a pleasant (or boring) distraction from your everyday routine.

But worship is meant to be so much more than a distraction from real life.

Worship is supposed to immerse us into a story far larger than any one of us. Larger even than any racial or national story.

In worship, we meet the living God who calls us each by name.

In worship, we lose ourselves in wonder, love, and praise—and we make our very lives an offering in response to the God who loves us, who forgives us, who calls us, who sends us.

And that's why the church's diminishment of worship has always bothered me. We know the temptation to make our worship about us—our kind of music—our way of prayer—our ending within a reasonable time frame—when worship is about something else entirely.

When we get it right, our worship looks something like Isaiah's encounter with God in the Temple.

And it will always begin in the reality of our Holy God who alone is worthy of our praise—and of our lives.

I've become convinced that our diminished understanding of the holiness of God has caused within us a diminished sense of our own identity, as well as a greatly reduced understanding of our role in God's reign. Isaiah's encounter with God in the temple reminds us—and informs us—of what it means to be completely swept up in the holiness of the God who forms us and calls us.

I like the way Annie Dillard describes the church's Sunday worship. She writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

It is this waking God who draws Isaiah into an awareness of God's Holiness, and into a real assessment of his own need for confession. Then, renewed by the calling God, Isaiah captures a vision of service far bigger than himself, to bear witness to the God he has encountered in the Temple. To respond to God in reverence and confession and service. To cherish God by committing heart and soul to the ministry he had been given.

Can you imagine such an encounter with God? Can you imagine being so overwhelmed by the mystery of God that you live lost in wonder, love and praise?

If so, then you're cluing in to the holiness of God which fills not just this sanctuary, but every facet of our lives. Water becomes a sign of the grace which claims us. Ordinary bread and wine become for us living symbols. The ordinary becomes extraordinary through the grace of our God.

That's why worship is so important for the church.

It's not that it's the only thing we do. But worship is the one essential activity from which all of our other actions flow and to which all others return.

My former professor—Tom Long—once wrote about the importance of worship for the church. He writes:

"To put it bluntly, either God *is*—or God is not.

There is either the Burning Bush calling us to be God's people, or there is merely wishful thinking reflected in the glint of the sun on the shrub. Either an angel speaks, or the sky simply thunders."

And it matters that **God is** for a very real reason.

Even at our best, we grow weary of fighting for justice.

Our good intentions alone are never enough. We turn from issues of race to immigration to sexism to nationalism to truth-telling in a never-ending desire to set things right in the world. And all of that work is good work—and needed work.

But all of our ethical action depends upon maintaining some vision of what God is doing in the world, a vision that embraces but also transcends our own efforts.

And it is precisely such a vision—a vision of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world—which lies at the heart of worship.

And that's why you'll come to see that I make a big deal about how we don't just leave at the end of worship. We are sent by God.

Sent into the world to bear hope. And not some idealistic hope, but the kind of hope Augustine talked about as having twin daughters—anger and courage. God sends us to hope in a way that makes us angry about the things that should not be—to notice the places where myriad hearts are breaking—whether from unintentional evil or from evil wrapped in policy or fear or despair.

And then, when your hope leads you to anger, you don't stop there. You are then sent to show courage in making sure that those things that should not be are brought to an end.

In that way, as our worship ends with our God sending us into the world to love and to serve, we show that our worship doesn't take us from the world—as some sort of happy escape—but rather sends us deeper into it, to join with the Spirit who is making all things new.

Maybe you're wondering: "But I've never really experienced worship that way."

Or maybe you've said what I've heard more times than I ever care to hear: But I never get anything out of worship. Have you heard that from your children? Or your spouse? Or some voice deep inside you?

Not too long ago, one of my favorite people in the world died. Her name was Beverly St. John. As I thought about Isaiah's story of entering the Temple and experiencing God—and how that story shapes the church's worship—Beverly kept popping into my mind.

Beverly was among the most generous, open, loving people you could ever know.

And one story in particular holds the key to why that was true: When she was a young child, she remembers saying to father after worship one morning, "I didn't get anything out of worship today." By some miracle of grace, her father's response changed the contours of Beverly's life: "Who ever told you were supposed to get something from it?"

Beverly never forgot her father's words.

With her father's question guiding her practice of worship, Beverly discovered the truth. True worship leads us to ask the question, "How then shall I live?" And once we worship God, all roads lead to a life of service, a life of love, a life committed to living by the way of Jesus Christ.

It's clear that Beverly "got" something from a lifetime of worship.

She feasted at the banquet table of God's grace and saw a table far wider than any she could have imagined. And she made her table wide as well. She heard story after story of the breadth and depth of God's love and mercy, and she determined to live the same way.

Beverly did what God hopes we will all do. She became the liturgy she celebrated. And her life took on the beauty and fullness of the God we meet in worship—a God who welcomes the prodigals home, who eats with outcasts and sinners, who tears down the walls that divide, who is always at work to make all things new.

And that's what makes our worship dangerous.

Isaiah discovered that when he entered the Temple and encountered God that day. He left with a renewed heart and a resounding call: Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?

Here am I, he said. Send me.

So I want to tell you, though I suspect you already know this. This holy God who wanted Isaiah also wants us. And the truth is, that's more than a little bit frightening.

There is no telling, after all, what this holy God might ask of you, or of me—whether to give or serve or teach or feed. Who knows what our holy God will ask of us?

But I do know this.

When we hear God asking something of us, it would be an awfully good thing to answer along with Isaiah, "Here am I. Send me."