

MYSTERIOUS ENCOUNTER

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on May 27, 2018 (Trinity Sunday)

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. 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.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!” 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.” Then 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!”

- Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

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One of the most important things we do as a community of faith is to worship together. We do it just about every week. And many people who observe the church and the society in which we live believe that worship will be changing in the years to come (just as it has changed in many ways since the first century). So I thought it would be important – in this interim time – to talk about worship: How we do it, and why we do it.

To be honest, some of the reasons that we worship include “because we’ve always done it.” It’s an occasion to meet together with friends, and participate in familiar rituals of prayer and music. On a good Sunday, you might hear something interesting or thought-provoking – often more likely in the children’s time than in the sermon for grown-ups. There is a certain amount of habit and tradition at work. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

But I hope there is something more that attracts people to worship – not only life-long church members, but sometimes even seekers who know almost nothing about our church traditions, but are looking for something that seems to be missing in their lives.

I think the key to “why we worship” can be found in considering “how we worship.” Who came up with this crazy format we follow most Sundays – this “mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning” -- as Annie Dillard puts it?

It turns out that Christian worship traditions are based on the patterns of Jewish worship in the synagogue – which makes sense, since Christianity grew out of a Jewish background. Jesus and his first followers, and many of the first Christians, were raised as Jews.

And I once learned that a biblical pattern or template for worship is found in this sixth chapter of the prophet Isaiah – in the story of Isaiah’s encounter with the Holy One in the temple in Jerusalem.

Let me take you through this passage in detail. This is a story of worship. Isaiah was in the temple that once stood in Jerusalem, where the Holy One was believed to dwell – in the innermost part of the temple known as the “Holy of Holies.” The year was “the year that King Uzziah (of Judah) died...” (742 BCE). Isaiah had a vision of the Lord sitting on a throne. Maybe it seemed to him that curtains or fabric hangings in the temple were the hem of God’s robe. There were carvings of seraphs in the temple – fiery, angelic creatures with six wings who served as attendants or body guards for the Eternal Spirit, and they seemed to sing a song of praise:

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

Maybe there was a choir singing in the temple at the time.

Here is where we begin our worship – coming into God’s presence, being aware of God’s presence, and singing our praise.

The place seemed to shake (from music?) and the temple filled with smoke (from the altar where offerings were burned). And Isaiah says,

“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 is a prayer of confession. Some people don’t like doing confession at all – it reminds them of church communities that seem to shame everyone as hopeless sinners – for their doubts or questions, or sexuality. We are not hopeless sinners. But we are not always faithful to our relationship with God. We also sometimes speak with unclean lips – hurting or demeaning others. We often wander off to follow other gods that do not bring life.

Praise and confession are some of the ways that we regularly remind ourselves that we are not God. This is important. It is so easy to start to think that way – that everything depends on us and what we do; that we alone know and understand how the world works. Praise and confession are “attitude readjustment” tools. And this is one of the reasons worship is important – to restore a healthy view of ourselves: We are beautiful and gifted and beloved, but we also mess up and think either too little or too highly of ourselves.

After the confession comes the assurance of forgiveness – the live coal from the altar that takes away sin and guilt. We are declared accepted in God’s presence. We are ready for the big moment.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

This is it. This is what we come for. This is what the beginning of worship has prepared us for: to hear a word from God.

Isaiah thought he heard God address him in the temple. But God doesn’t always seem to show up when we gather for worship in temples or sanctuaries – but perhaps practicing it here will open us up to experience God elsewhere. In the early church, when the community gathered for worship some of the people would “prophesy” – which is not future-telling, but rather speaking what they believed was God’s truth to the community. Apparently, some members of the early church had the gift of prophecy. Some still do, today – although they are usually not the preachers on TV who claim that God speaks to them.

This is a problem the church has wrestled with. How can we be sure to hear an authentic word from God when we gather for worship? How can we discern between authentic prophets and false prophets? The historic answer has been to put together a set of sacred texts – stories and letters and visions that have come to be recognized as authentic records of ways that God has spoken in the past. We read from the Bible. And in our tradition, we have sought faithful and educated people who could read the Bible, understand its original context, and translate the ancient message into our time and situation in effective ways. Preachers.

Many years ago, when I was still new in this ministry business, I had a phone interview with a search committee for a church I was interested in. One of the questions they asked me was, “What makes a good sermon?” At the time, I didn’t know quite what to answer. Some of the descriptions that churches often give are a sermon that “speaks to the head and the heart.” Entertaining; insightful; helps people to live their daily lives; brief.

But I think the right answer to that question is that a good sermon helps us hear God’s word for us. A word that challenges us, and provokes a response. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, “Here I am; send me!”

That is why we worship. That is what we gather for.

One of the big changes we are facing as people of faith is that many younger post-moderns do not trust “experts” to tell them the truth. That includes seminary-trained preachers. They want to discover it themselves by sharing their own ideas and experiences, and listening to others do the same. So 21st century worship services may not have a sermon like we have been accustomed to for the past five centuries or more.

This summer we will give folks a chance to ask questions they would like me to respond to in a sermon. I hope we get some good questions. I may even give folks in the congregation to share

their ideas. You may not like it. I don't know how effective they will be. We are in a period of trying new ideas, not knowing what will work well. But try to be open, and to ask not whether you liked it, but whether it allowed you to hear a word from God.

The rest of worship is response – our “Here I am; send me.” We respond by giving our gifts to support the work of the church. We respond by praying. We respond by breaking bread together and baptizing new believers. We respond by singing. And most importantly, we respond by going out into the world to live out our response to God's challenging and empowering word.

Which isn't always easy. If you continue to read in the 6th chapter of Isaiah, you will see that he was called to a ministry of futility, urging a community to turn to God for healing -- but a community who refused to listen or see.

Living out our faith calling in the world is hard. It meets with resistance. False gods and the people who worship them will confuse you and frustrate you and suck the life out of you. Dealing with people – even people we love – can be messy and exhausting. That is why we must regularly return to worship – to reorient ourselves, to confess how we have failed, and to hear the word of challenge and hope and new life again.

How we worship has been patterned after Isaiah's encounter. There are probably other ways, faithful to our traditions and to the ways that God works, to worship. But I keep coming back to the why we worship. It is to be fed and challenged by the living God, made known in Jesus Christ. It is to hear the words of eternal life and to be born anew by the Spirit. And then it is to be sent out in mission – in the name of our Triune God.

Amen.

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