

Another Sunday at St. Luke's

Sunday, May 30, 2021

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

Pastor James Haun

Isaiah 6:1-8

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 had entered the Temple court to worship, when suddenly he witnessed a spectacular appearance of the Almighty! He saw God exalted upon His throne. He saw mighty angelic beings loudly praising, the room filled with smoke and the foundations shook. We commonly identify this passage as the prophetic calling of Isaiah, and this is correct, but then again, could we consider this experience to be just another Sunday at St. Luke's?

Isaiah's encounter with God in the Temple, extraordinary as it was, has long been studied and held up as a model of our ordinary worship experiences. Actually, there is little ordinary about *any* worship, for it involves a meeting with God, and in Isaiah 6 we find a most helpful study of the structure and flow of that meeting. While our reading of Isaiah's amazing experience may cause us to step back in awe, it should also lead us to step forward to take a deeper look at just what happens when we enter into the wonderful privilege of worship.

Worship begins with our entering into God's presence. Of course, simply walking into a Church will not magically make this happen, but as we gather with God's people and as we seek God's presence, great things happen. In our Old Testament passage, we

find Isaiah in the Temple. As the text mentions the king's death some have guessed that Isaiah was in the Temple courts mourning the nation's loss and praying for God's help for the days to come. Isaiah came seeking God and soon discovered that God was seeking him!

The heavens opened and he saw the Lord. God was awesome and majestic, and in response to God's glory the heavenly creatures praised. Praise accompanies our God, and if we are to enter into God's presence, praise is the way to do it. On many Sunday mornings as we begin our worship service you have heard me say to our music leader, "Doug, bring us into the presence of God." The music is not offered as some formality or even to help adjust our moods. As we begin to praise, we are drawn into the presence of God! Praise is no minor matter, and it is so important that we sing with a deep sense of joy and anticipation.

As we join the hosts of heaven in praise, we, like the prophet, experience a reciprocal response. Just as Isaiah experienced a mighty scene of worship, there came an overwhelming feeling of guilt and anguish which caused him to tremble. *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!"* Why this sudden outburst? Some see this as merely a habit of people in ancient times who felt compelled to react in a self-deprecating way when sensing God's presence, but this is a foolish misunderstanding of the ancients. Perfection and grandeur, which always surround God, have a strong humbling effect on those who witness it. Consider your own life experiences.

Have you ever seen the Grand Canyon? It will take your breath away! Those who have been there know the experience. It is so huge and impressive that one's first response to seeing it is to feel deeply humbled. Its greatness reminds us just how small we are. I think of David who in the 8th Psalm felt so small as he marveled at the stars of the night sky. The power of God can make us feel very weak. I think of Peter's call early in Luke's Gospel (5:1-11). Peter's attitude toward Jesus was rather casual until he witnessed a great miracle of the Master the miraculous catch of fish. Suddenly realizing just who this Jesus was Peter fell down and pleaded with Him, *Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!* Seeing how great and powerful God is made Peter suddenly realize how small and weak he was. There is hardly a worship service that goes by in which I am not humbled by the love and goodness of God, especially as I see it revealed in Christ. Perhaps it is in the amazing wisdom, or the incredible forgiveness which we witness regularly. A simple meditation about the Cross and the kind of love that this involves will humble even the hardest heart.

And so Isaiah was humbled, just as we are humbled weekly. We sing the praises of a mighty, righteous and loving God, and are confronted by our own weakness, selfishness and lack of love. With a sense of heaviness, we turn to God to confess our sorry state, and with that confession comes mercy! *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." From the beginning let it be said that God delights to forgive. Too many see religion as a world of guilt, and God as a great manipulator who wants to make sure that we are all feeling burdened by large quantities of guilt. A sense of guilt should draw us to God, just as a sense of thirst would drive us to find water, and it is God's desire that we be forgiven and refreshed.

Isaiah's experience of being forgiven by God is in one way unique to him, yet it has real meaning for all of us. He was touched by a coal from the altar. The altar was the place of sacrifice where an animal was given as payment for sin. This act of being touched by a hot coal was a transfer of that saving value of the sacrifice to Isaiah. As wild and strange as the prophet's experience may have been, we can all claim the same forgiveness, for the sacrifice of Jesus upon God's altar of the Cross has been applied to us as we call out for cleansing from sin. God is also careful to see that the fullness and effectiveness of Isaiah's forgiveness is made clear, hence the angelic creature's announcement of forgiveness. It is no accident that our worship service always includes an *assurance* of pardon, for God wants us to live as an assured and confident people. It deserves to be said again and again—God does not desire or delight in our living as a guilt-burdened people. God does not wish to coerce or manipulate us through guilt. God wants us to be forgiven!

To be forgiven is a wonderful feeling, and this is just the first phase of worship. The experience of praise, confession and forgiveness leads us into God's presence. Now it is time to hear from the Almighty! Isaiah heard a clear word from God, and the message he heard was a calling to be one of God's prophets. *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* If we are to look only at this passage of scripture, we might get the idea that God only invites us into His presence so that He can give us an assignment, but this is not a fair conclusion to draw. I suppose that some see the Church as an organization that only wants to bring us inside its doors so that we can be recruited to do its work, and there are Churches out there that may live up to this accusation, but what is going on at this phase of the divine encounter is much more than mere recruitment. These words from God began a dialogue with Isaiah which follows our brief passage of the day, and this calling began a lifetime of the prophet's dialogue with God.

After we have entered into God's presence through praise, confession and forgiveness, we enter a time of hearing from God. We hear the scriptures read and we hear a pastor explain that holy Word. The Bible is full of calls and invitations to work and serve, as Isaiah was called to work and serve, but there is much more to the story. As we listen to God's Word in the scriptures, we find an amazing plan which is still unfolding. We learn of a Creator who made us for fellowship with Him and with each other. We learn of a broken and rebellious world which appears to have spun out of control. We learn of a gracious and patient God who refuses to give up on us and our rebellious world, and of a Savior who came to preach, love, die for our sins and rise

again in victory. We hear of the glorious new life which we are called to live as Christ's people, and we learn of a future and a coming Kingdom. There is so much to learn, and though the Bible can be such a challenging book, the story is true, and it is our great joy and hope! It is in sessions of worship that we learn and grow in understanding and faith.

God has a plan, and as we study that plan, we must always bear in mind that this is not like studying ancient history or some removed and distant story. This is *our* story, and it is happening right now, and we are being called to be a living and active part of that story. Do you remember a few weeks ago when we considered Jesus' words to His disciples that he no longer considered them servants, but friends? (John 15:13-17) We will always be servants of God, but Jesus was stressing that unlike an uninformed servant, He would always be discussing and explaining to us the plan of God. We are all a part of God's big plan, and the joy of our lives should be the ongoing discovery of this plan and all that it means. Those who only see the Christian life as a long list of frustrating rules do not understand the real meaning and joy of our calling.

I am reminded of the gifted and happy child, and the challenged and angry child. Some young ones are quick learners and can readily understand the lessons which are presented to them, and the expectations of the world around them. These gifted souls are likely to enjoy life for they sense that there is a plan in their being part of the wider community and world. Then there are the little ones who are not so quick to learn and understand. School lessons do not come easily so they become frustrated and resentful of those who learn much more easily. The world's rules don't seem to make sense and it may feel that these rules were set in place only to make that young person miserable. When it is difficult to see the rhyme and reason of the world, it is hard to have a positive attitude about one's life. The real task and challenge before one raising a child is to help them understand how the world works and God's loving plan for them. For some this requires extra patience and effort. And so it is that God instructs us. God's delight is not in piling on rules or assignments, but in helping us to understand and to delight in His loving plan and our part in that plan.

The final phase of our worship encounter involves our response to God. God graciously asks questions, and questions require a response. Worship is ultimately an opportunity to say yes, just as the prophet said yes. *And I said, "Here am I; send me!"* What a beautiful answer to God! This is a servant's response. Here I am, ready to serve as you desire. These words echo the responses of Abraham, Moses and Samuel who were called by God centuries before Isaiah. Whenever we respond to any request, we are very conscious of our possible inability to complete the task. "Can you help me with this?" a friend may ask. Our answer is usually a cautious one. "I can try." We fear committing to a task which may be beyond our abilities. How sweet it is to hear the prophet's response. We do well to imitate it. *"Here I am; send me."* Lord, I don't know

if I can do all that you ask, but here I am, and I will serve. All Isaiah could do was offer himself.

Worship is to be a time of responding to God and offering ourselves to God's service. In our final phase of worship, having heard God's voice, we respond. We rise and affirm our faith. We present God our prayers which God gladly receives. We give from the blessings God has given us, and when it is time to leave and return to the world we go, confident that God's blessing and power goes with us.

Isaiah freely said yes. Is your spirit echoing the prophet's willingness, or are your prayers crying out for the strength to say yes? It seems obvious that Isaiah was shaken to his very core when he met God in the Temple, and his yes to God may not have felt particularly confident! So it is for all of God's people. As we draw near to God, we are more than welcome to pour out our prayers for strength and refreshment. We can lay before God our fear and fatigue. When I gladly report that God is calling you all to new avenues ,of service I am sure that most respond in fear. "Oh no, Lord! Not more things to do! I can't keep up with all I have to do already!" It is not God's desire to overload us. What we can do in this place of worship is ask God to help us re-tune and re-balance our lives in ways which would give Him glory. Jesus does ask us to bear a yoke, but to rejoice as that yoke is lighter than the one which the world would try to place upon us! (Matthew 11:29-30)

In worship we re-connect with God, and as we prepare to leave worship, we know that we are continuing on our journey with a newness and freshness to our calling. Isaiah had a long and wonderful ministry ahead of him. He would guide kings, help a nation through crisis, predict disaster and then tell of restoration which would follow. Isn't it great to know that God has such great new plans for each of us? Some will object. "I'm too old for new adventures." Never! There is always plenty of time for new endeavors.

In moments we will re-enter a chaotic world, but we will do so with the glad assurance that we are walking in harmony with the God of heaven and earth who has a glorious plan for our lives. Are you nervous about a new beginning? No need to fear with eternity ahead of us.

How honored we are to be invited into the courts of heaven as we enter into worship. A lot happens in the holy hour and all of it is amazing. Then again, we could also say it's just another Sunday at St. Luke's.