

“The Danger of Going to Church”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

October 29, 2006

Text: “And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8b).

This past week Katie Couric conducted an interview with Michael J. Fox on the *CBS Evening News*. Michael Fox, who suffers from Parkinson disease, has been in the news recently in his campaign for government funding for stem cell research. Last week he was accused by a number of commentators of failing to take his medication and of faking the symptoms of dyskinesia, the uncontrollable shaking that comes with an advanced case of Parkinson disease. One of the things that I found impressive about the interview was that the Michael Fox did not engage in self-pity. He spoke with respect about those who for religious or other moral reasons oppose stem funding, but he also acknowledged that he believes in what he is doing. He said that if bringing the message means that the messenger gets “roughed up a bit,” he would be happy to be that guy.

He went on to say that as much as he hates having such a terrible disease at such a young age, it had given his life a sense of meaning and purpose. For that reason, he said, he was grateful that he had the disease.

There is nothing more critical in every person’s life than the search for meaning. Sometimes it can take an extraordinary event such as a death or severe illness to help a person discover some purpose in his or her personal life.

But there are other ways as well for a person to find meaning.

I.

In the passage that forms the basis of our text for today we find a dramatic encounter between God and the prophet Isaiah that apparently took place in the Temple at Jerusalem. Isaiah 6 is essentially a call story, one of those stories that occur in both the Old and New Testament when a person is confronted with the presence of God and is called to represent God as a prophet or in some other leadership capacity. In this call story the prophet Isaiah finds himself in the presence of the heavenly council. God is described as sitting on a throne with the skirts of his robe filling the temple or heavenly palace. Attendant upon the deity are the six-winged seraphim, which proclaim the holiness of God and the universality of his glory. In the presence of the divine council the prophet is aware of his own sinfulness. He receives forgiveness and hears the question of the almighty: "Whom shall we send and who will go for us?" To which he responds, "Here am I. Send me."

For the prophet Isaiah this confrontation with the living God was a defining moment in his life. He was commissioned by God to be the messenger of God. One of the most remarkable aspects of Isaiah's call was that it took place in the context of worship.

Worship is at the very heart of the life of a church. When *The Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) speaks of the "great ends of the church" the first of these is the "proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind." There are many things that a church could do poorly, perhaps some things that a church could do without, but worship is not one of these.

To be sure, the Bible repeatedly calls us to worship. The worship of God was at the center of Israel's faith. In the same fashion Jesus went to the synagogue each Sabbath. The Apostle Paul warns us that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

II.

But, having said that, there is something else that must be said. There is a danger of going to church. In this same passage that recounts God's call to Isaiah there is a stern warning about "trampling the courts of God."

One of the strongest indictments against worship is found in the prophecy on Amos, who quotes God as saying:

"I hate, I despise your feasts,
I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
To the melody of your harps I will not listen."
(Amos 5: 21-24).

The prophets understood how worship could be abused. They knew that it could conceal all kinds of evil practices. Harry Emerson Fosdick once told of a sermon he preached on the

comforts of religion. There was a man in his church that liked the sermon. He really liked it. He liked it so much that he ordered a copy of it and had it framed in his home. A year later, Fosdick reported, that man was convicted of a scheme of fraud and theft against one of the large investment firms in New York City. Fosdick recounted that he would never preach a sermon that spoke about the comforts of religion without also reminding people of the demands of religion as well.

Jesus was certainly aware of the abuse of religion. One of the most sarcastic things that Jesus ever said about anyone was about people who, as he put it, “love to stand and pray in the synagogues.”

But while many of us are keenly aware of how worship can be misused, we are equally aware of what worship at its best can mean—inward reinforcement, a clear vision of one’s duty, restored faith and courage. Sometimes we enter into a sanctuary depleted and faltering and leave “strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man.” We find in worship courage for daily living and a sense of purpose that had escaped us.

So what is it in worship that we find so compelling?

III.

One of the things that worship can do is bring about a transformation in a person’s life. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and well-known author, relates an experience in his early life that had a profound effect on him. He had graduated from Princeton University and was living in New York City, struggling to become a writer. He ended up attending the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. The minister of that church was a man named Dr. George Buttrick, who was one of the most famous preachers in America at that time. Buechner acknowledged that there was much in Buttrick’s sermons that caught his attention. Buttrick was wonderfully eloquent, literate, and imaginative. But one day in one worship service something happened to Buechner that changed his life. This is how he puts it:

“Something in me recoils from using such language, but here at the end I am left with no other way of saying it than that what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which. There are other words for describing what happened to me--psychological words, historical words, poetic words--but in honesty as well as in faith I am reduced to the word that is his name because no other seems to account for the experience so fully.”

That has been the experience of countless of other people who have found in worship a transforming experience.

IV.

There is another thing that worship can do. It can give a person a much keener sense of the ethical dimension of life. One of the most famous missionaries of the Nineteenth Century was a medical doctor name Wilfred Grenfell. For many years he served as a medical missionary

to the people of Labrador. But very few people know where Grenfell's life of faith began. It began in a worship service. The famous evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, conducted the service, but it could not have been a very dignified affair. At one point in the service Moody asked one of the other ministers to pray--and he did--on and on for forty-five minutes. Finally Moody had to get up and interrupt the man by saying, "While the brother here is finishing his prayer, let us sing hymn #161." It wasn't the impressive architecture of Moody's temple that caught the attention of this medical doctor. It wasn't the sermon or even the grandeur of the sermon. Grenfell said later that on that particular day he felt he had really worshipped God and found his worse self confronted by his best self, and his better self confronted by Christ so that this man redirected his life so that he could make his life count for the kingdom of God. That is going to church at its best.

Some people come to church because they want and need to be comforted. And there is nothing wrong with that. Often we seek the church as a sanctuary from the daily pressures of life. We long to hear the words of Christ who said, "Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you." But Christian worship, while providing comfort, must also challenge a congregation to make some important decisions.

Several months the *New York Times* carried a page-long obituary on the death of William Sloan Coffin, who was for a number of years the Dean of the Chapel at Yale University and pastor of the Riverside Church of New York City. William Sloan Coffin was probably the most famous social activist of an entire generation. He was part of the early "Freedom Riders" who moved through the South confronting racial segregation in the churches. During the late 1960's and into the 1970's he was arrested and jailed on a number of occasions for his opposition to the War in Viet Nam. There were people who did not like Bill Coffin or what he stood for, but there was hardly anyone on the Yale campus who did not know what he stood for and that kind of ethical conscience is sorely missed today.

V.

There is something else that worship can do. It can energize a person and allow that person to direct his or her life in a brand new way. Someone once observed that all life can be reduced to two aspects--work and worship. Work is what we do ourselves. It is something we achieve and to which we belong. Worship, on the other hand is not what we do, but what is done for us. It requires receptivity and openness. Or, to put it another way, the boat of life is rowed by two oars--work and worship and the trouble with many of us is that are rowing with one oar and going nowhere.

Bryant Kirkland, who for many years was the minister of the Fifth Avenue Church in New York City, once said that he did not see how a person could live and work in Manhattan and not worship. The same is true in Charlotte as well.

We should never underestimate the power of worship. Long ago a prophet by the name of Isaiah went into the temple of Jerusalem, and seeing the Lord high and lifted up, responded to the Lord by saying, "Here am I. Send me." It was in a small church in New England that Harriet

Beecher Stowe received the inspiration for her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a literary work that did more to end slavery than almost any legislation imaginable. It was in a worship service that William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, received the call of God to minister to the most destitute people in the city of London.

God grant us wisdom and courage that we may hear his word and follow in his way.

Amen!