

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.17.2021



## Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise

The Reverend Pen Peery

Isaiah 6:1-8

Today we are continuing our sermon series on the Great Ends of the Church – six statements that have guided the Presbyterian Church and named our purpose for more than 100 years. As a reminder, we thought this would be a good series to start this year...our Bicentennial year...as we not only celebrate where God has been along our journey, but where God is leading us.

Today we are focusing on the “Great End” called “The Maintenance of Divine Worship,” which...honestly...isn’t the most poetic language in the world. But what it means – is that as many other ways that the church expresses its mission – the worship of God is at the center. And providing a space and a time for God’s people to worship – even when we have to be as creative as we are now – gets to the essence of why the church exists.

The Scripture that I have chosen to pair with this “Great End” is a passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah. It is actually the story of when Isaiah receives his calling. It’s a majestic and mysterious passage – one that describes a vision that Isaiah had of the throne-room of God.



Frankly, to truly capture the feeling of the mystery, this is a passage that is better sung than read. So in a second, I am going to sit down and the choir is going to sing it.

Listen with me now for a word from God. And as we prepare to receive that word, please join me in prayer...

*By your Holy Spirit, Lord, open us now to your word in Scripture. Prepare our hearts, open our minds, and make us ready and willing to respond to the call it places on our lives. That we may live as people of your Word. We ask it through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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Sometimes it happens after the choir sings an anthem (like the one we just heard).

Sometimes it's in the poetic phrasing of a powerful prayer.

Other times it's when a word of Scripture rings especially true.

Or when a sermon touches a deep part of your heart.

Sometimes it's when the baby squeals during a baptism.

Or when the teenager, whose baptism you remember, speaks on Youth Sunday.

I'm describing some of those moments when it feels like you are in the presence of the holy.



When it feels like the veil is lifted and God is close...or maybe it's you who are more present.

Where goosebumps rise on your neck and your arms.

And your breath quickens.

And maybe a lump forms in your throat.

It doesn't happen all the time.

But my guess is, if you have been in the sanctuary enough, it's happened to you before.

A feeling of transcendence.

Of being lifted up.

Spiritually alive and attuned to power of God.

That feeling can happen outside of this room, too, of course.

But in **this** room – during this time we call worship – reaching for the transcendent is our aim. It's why the sanctuary is shaped in the form of a cross with ceilings that reach toward the heavens. It's why the choir invests time and energy on music that takes effort to sing. It's why the liturgy – the parts of our service – are ordered in the ways that they are...so we can prepare ourselves to hear the Word of God, and then be led out into the world to serve.

Yes – as a church, we do a lot of things – but what is primary...most important...is that we gather as God's people for worship.

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I wonder if you have ever thought about why we worship? About why worship is so central to the church's mission?

Certainly, we worship because that is the appropriate response to God; it is the way those who are created relate to the one who is the Creator. If you've been Presbyterian long enough, you've probably heard the first question and answer to one of our oldest catechisms: "What is the chief end of human kind? To love God and enjoy him forever." The way we do that is worship.

God does desire that we worship. But that's not because God has an ego need that that is ours to satisfy. As if the reason God created us was so God would be surrounded by praise. No, God desires that we worship because worship is good for us – it helps us stay true to who are as those created in God's image. It's the way we keep our north star.

Sometimes I hear people say the reason that worship is important is because it helps us forget about the rest of the world's problems. That worship is a retreat. A time when we take, literal, sanctuary...and escape the work and worry of our normal lives.

The problem with this view is that assumes, wrongly, that God...and God's people...are at odds with the world...or, at least, should "stay above the fray" and keep the world at a distance...focusing on *spiritual* matters instead of the more complicated nature of things we deem *political*.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Remember, "For God so loved the world that he sent his only son..." And if the church is the body of Christ, we are not called to be removed from the world around us – but, instead, are sent into it...to engage, and care, and challenge, and love.



The reason that we worship is because – when we are aware of the presence of the holy – it re-orientes our lives and puts us in a place to be about God’s work.

Today’s Scripture – that we heard proclaimed by the voices of our choir – tell that story. Isaiah’s vision – and I would encourage you as a piece of homework this afternoon to go back and read it...and look for this – Isaiah’s vision has four, distinctive parts that you might recognize because they show up in our own services of worship.

First – Isaiah has a moment of transcendence when he realizes he is in the presence of God. For Isaiah, it was a vision of a throne room, with six winged seraphs and singing. Isaiah was filled with wonder and awe.

Second – when Isaiah recognized that he was in the presence of the holy, he immediately feels the weight of his own inadequacies and mistakes. “Woe is me,” he said, “for I am man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Being in God’s presence puts things in perspective. It’s hard to hide our blemishes in the presence of the Light.

Third – God grants grace and pardon. God purifies Isaiah’s unclean lips with a hot coal...maybe not the most comfortable kind of forgiveness, but one that takes away the sin.

Fourth – because of these experiences, when God asks “whom shall I send?” Isaiah is in a position to answer – “here I am...send me.” Isaiah’s encounter with God leads him to respond with a desire to do God’s work. Isaiah approaches his



life's work as a prophet – not in order to earn God's favor, but because God has already been favorable.

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So far this in this sermon, I have focused on the question of **why** we worship. But as a church celebrating 200 years of ministry in the center of our city and looking ahead for what God is calling us to do next, there is another question about worship that I think is important for us to ask. That is: what difference does it make? Why does worship matter?

This week, as I have entertained that question, I came across an article from the New York Times that caught my eye. It was written a few years ago by a couple of psychologists – who referenced the work of another psychologist who once stood in this pulpit for a Willard Lecture, Dr. Jonathan Haidt.

The article was about the societal benefit of awe; about what happens to human behavior after an experience of the transcendent. What the science and the data show is that having an awe-filled experience is the most effective way to motivate people to move beyond self-interest and act in pursuit of the common good.

More effective than a well-reasoned argument, or a directive given by a person in a position of authority, or even an appeal to good sense.

What best helps us think beyond ourselves is when we recognize that we are in the presence of the holy; when we recognize the limitations of our thoughts, and opinions, and passionate points of view – the limits of our humanity – because we are confronted with God who is too wonderful for us to fully understand.



Worship matters because it liberates us to be about God's purpose; it unburdens us from having to seek our own ends so that we can reach for God's promises that benefit all people.

Worship matters because it helps us get beyond the narrow places we too often find ourselves – individually, and collectively...narrow places that will threaten to undo us if we cannot find another way.

Last Wednesday at the Capitol was an example of this narrow place.

Symbols of a white supremacy and hate flying inside a building designed to carry out laws to ensure that all people are treated equally and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.

A gallows built to intimidate and punish those who would dare suggest that any opinion contrary to the mob is credible.

An utter disdain...and inability to recognize the value of the other...that manifested in violence and threats of future violence.

As people of faith, we are right to condemn these actions and these threats. To resist giving in to these tactics of intimidation.

But we should also recognize that what happened on January 6<sup>th</sup> is a symptom of a society that is sin-sick with self-interest and self-preservation. A society that too easily rushes to confer power to people who promise to protect that self-interest.

And, as people of faith, it is our responsibility to bear witness to the truth that no person – or President...current, former, or future – can deliver us or give us what we really need.



We cannot substitute the human for the holy.

Instead, the church invests itself in the work of worship so that we can remember – and reorient our lives – around the One who awakens in us a higher purpose than ourselves.

And who calls us – who bear the name of his Son – to be about that work, together.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

