

“Food for the Journey: Worship” GPPC 7-10-16
Isaiah 6:1-8, Revelation 4:1-11

This morning we begin a five-week summer sermon series entitled, “Food for the Journey.” With the overarching metaphor of life as a spiritual journey, each week we’ll focus on one item we need to pack for the trip. Next Sunday, Jo will help us consider community. This Sunday we look at worship.

Many of you may remember that the movement in Isaiah 6:1-8 sets the pattern for worship in most Christian churches.

Isaiah sees a vision of God sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe fills the temple. The pivots on the doorframes shake and the whole place fills with smoke like some divine rock concert. Seraphs are “in attendance” above God, and these are not sweet, cuddly little angels. They are fierce six-winged fire creatures. With two wings they fly, with two they cover their faces and with two they cover their feet (a euphemism for genitals). Because of God’s holiness, they may not look directly upon God. And because of God’s holiness, they also

cover themselves. They call to each other in stereo. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.”

God is holy. God is not merely a nicer version of us. No. God is completely other. Not to be trifled with. Not to be ignored. Not to be evoked for selfish purposes. God is holy. But interestingly the earth with all its wonder is *not* called holy here. Instead, the seraphs say the whole earth is full of God’s glory. The world with all its beauty and marvels gives us a squinting sideways glimpse of God’s majesty. Yet God remains the Creator and *not* the creation.

What does this awesome scene evoke? Adoration, the first element in Sunday worship. Each week we begin our time together with prayers and hymns of praise. We gather together not to congratulate each other, not to be self-actualized, not for a pleasant self-help message and a few useful tips for being successful in life. No. We are called together to praise God who is awesome, terrifying, holy, and wonderful. In fact, Christians know that we and all creation actually *exist* to adore God. Our purpose in life is to adore God. Just as Isaiah experienced in his vision, we too begin with adoration.

But then once aware of God's holy presence, Isaiah becomes conscious of his own *unholy* presence, his failures, his sins and sinfulness. "Woe is me!" he says. "I'm lost, because I'm a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. Yet I've seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Isaiah's recognition of God's holiness makes him aware of his own unworthiness and it moves him to the next element in worship--confession. And notice *how* Isaiah confesses. He doesn't say, "Well, Lord, I've made a couple of poor choices in my life, but I'm actually a truly virtuous person with just a few itsy-bitsy flaws." And he doesn't say, "My people are really sweet and basically pure-hearted." No. Isaiah says, "Woe is me! I've had it! In God's presence, I know I'm a mess and so are my people." Isaiah doesn't pussyfoot around with some halfhearted, insincere confession. He gets real about who he is and who God is.

But in our day, private and corporate confession of sin seems quaint, out of fashion, a real downer. Maybe a joke for a TV sitcom or movie. We ought to focus more on being positive, you know. Who needs

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to inventory our sins? We do. God's love is unconditional and all our sins are forgiven by God's grace, not by our work or even by being sufficiently mournful. But unless we are willing to take the time to be honest about our lives, we will never grow very much as disciples of Christ. Until we look inward and truly acknowledge who we are and who God is, then we miss out on the fullness of life that is offered to us. So we do confess our sins—our own sins, our country's sins, and our world's sins. We confess.

And that leads to the next element in worship--the assurance of pardon. Isaiah describes it in a way that is graphic and almost unbearable. He says a seraph flies to him holding a live coal snatched from a fire on the altar. The seraph touches this burning coal to Isaiah's lips and says, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt is departed and your sin blotted out." The next time you're standing beside a campfire, imagine taking a burning coal from the fire and touching it to your lips. What is Isaiah trying to communicate with this grotesque imagery? Maybe he is using it to picture God's grace burning away our sin, purging the brokenness and evil in our lives. And because the

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picture he is painting is excruciating, maybe he is also reminding us of the costliness of discipleship.

After confessing his sins and hearing that he is pardoned, Isaiah is ready for the next step in worship—hearing the word of God.

Presbyterians have always placed a special emphasis on hearing the word of God. And we believe God's word comes to us in three ways. The first and preeminent way is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The second way is through the Bible. And the third way is through preaching. As one of our confessions of faith reads, “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God....when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful...” (The Second Helvetic Confession) Likewise, one of our catechisms says, “The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation.” (The Westminster Shorter Catechism)

Presbyterians have insisted that our clergy *and* laypeople be well-educated in reading and interpreting God's word. We believe there is more to hearing God's word than good intention and fervent emotion. We believe in worshiping God with the life of the mind. So the Presbyterian Church (USA) is the only denomination in the country that requires its ministers to learn New Testament Greek *and* Old Testament Hebrew and to pass not only oral ordination exams but a five-part written examination. Our expectation is that Presbyterian ministers will be competent scholars who take on the rigorous work of faithfully interpreting Scripture for our day, engaging their congregations to bring the gospel to bear on the great issues that face every new generation of Christians. Jesus Christ is Lord of *all* areas of our personal and corporate life. So Presbyterians expect the word of God to be preached with clarity, integrity, and passion to address *all* aspects of our life together, even if God's word to us makes us uncomfortable. And if the preaching of the word doesn't make us uncomfortable from time to time, then something is terribly wrong. And there is more to hearing the word of God than the preacher's careful preparation and delivery of the sermon.

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Fred Rogers, better known as Mr. Rogers of TV's "Mister Rogers Neighborhood" was a Presbyterian minister and a graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He told this story as part of a commencement address there. He said, "One summer, midway through seminary, I had a stimulating course in homiletics and was on a weekend vacation in a little town in New England. I decided on Sunday to go hear a visiting preacher in the little town's chapel. I walked in with my fresh homiletic knowledge and eventually heard an 85-year-old minister delivering the worst sermon I ever could have imagined. I sat in the pew thinking, 'He's going against every rule they ever taught us about preaching. What a waste of time!' That's what I thought up until the very end of the sermon when I happened to see the person beside me with tears in her eyes, whispering, 'He said exactly what I need to hear.' It was then that I knew something very important had happened in that service. The woman beside me had come in need. Somehow the words of that poorly crafted sermon had been translated into a message that spoke to her heart. On the other hand, I had come in judgment; and

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it was a long time before I realized it, but that sermon's effect on the person beside me turned out to be one of the great lessons of my life. Thanks to that old minister and listener-in-need, I now know that the space between a person's mouth doing the best he or she can to deliver a message of good news—that that space between that person and the needy listener is holy ground. The Holy Spirit uses that space in marvelously, wonderful ways.” (Fred McFeely

Rogers, *Panorama* Volume XLIII, No. 1, 7)

On Sunday mornings, we hear the word of God as we listen for the word of God in our need. And that leads us to the last element of worship. God asks Isaiah, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Us is a reference to the heavenly court, not to multiple gods.) And Isaiah answers, “Here am I; send me!” The final part of worship is the sending.

The church is always sent into the world. The church has not been called into being in order to navel-gaze and ponder whether its members are saved. Nor is it meant to care primarily for its own

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members, as important as caring for our members is. No. The church has been called together to be sent out to serve and to be a part of God's healing of the world. We are God's advance guard sent ahead as God's wages peace on a world torn by hatred, violence, and misunderstanding. It has been a bloody and heartbreak week for our country, hasn't it? But even now God is calling and sending the church to be a part of the healing.

In a sermon, Bible scholar Fred Craddock said that Revelation chapters 4 and 5 present "the clearest, most central image of God in the Bible." And in those two chapters what do we witness? We witness the throne room of heaven. And what is happening there? Worship. Who is worshiping? All creation is worshiping. Why? Because the God we know in Jesus Christ is there. The God who gave all the world and each one of us life is there. The God who has blotted out our sin, made our guilt depart, and brought back into relationship is there. The God who has subdued and will subdue all evil and death is there. So we gather

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Sunday after Sunday to join our voices with the voices in that room, the room that holds eternity, singing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

That’s what we sing. *That’s* what we sing. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal