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## What Do We Expect from Worship<sup>1</sup>

Hebrews 12:28-29 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

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!"

Our text from the prophet Isaiah is a strange passage of scripture, isn't it? Now that phrase, "Holy, holy, holy," is not strange and it was the prophet's words that gave rise to the hymn by the same name that we sang last week, but what about the cherubims and the six-winged seraphims and flaming tongs and live coals – what in the world do we do with these references, what in the world does this passage have to say to us today, and what in the world shall we learn from it? Well, let me cut to the chase:

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<sup>1</sup>I am very indebted to Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii, whose sermon of January 18, 2009, is substantially the basis for – and the occasion for gratefully and significantly borrowing from – this sermon today.

this dramatic story from the prophet Isaiah – the story of his call to ministry, actually -- is one of the few passages in the Bible that portrays a worship service and in so doing reminds us of what the **purpose** of worship is and reminds us of **what God is like**, and therefore teaches and reminds us of what we expect - and should expect! – when we worship. Now, that’s all very abstract, so let’s explore what I mean more concretely.

Do you realize that the Bible is actually relatively silent on how, exactly, we are supposed to worship when we gather to do so. In fact, much of what we do in Sunday worship, much of what is familiar to us and even beloved by us, much of what may seem essential to us is not even mentioned in the Bible. You can read the Bible from beginning to end and you’ll not find one word about preludes or pianos, about announcements and introits, about postludes or pews or pastoral prayers. And worship across the Church Universal is done in very diverse ways.. In the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, worship is a glorious, poetic service of lavish, long liturgy. Services often last 3 or 4 hours. And the churches in that faith have no pews. So both pastor and congregation stand throughout the entire three hour service! Shall we try that some Sunday? Or perhaps you have been to a Quaker service? Their churches have pews but often have no preaching. Instead, the congregation gathers in silence, sitting quietly on those pews until the Holy Spirit moves someone to speak. And if the Holy Spirit keeps quiet for two hours, the congregation stays quiet for two hours, waiting patiently for the Holy Spirit to inspire someone. One of the longest hours I ever spent in my life was at a Quaker wedding where we sat for what seemed like decades until finally the bride and groom were moved by the Spirit to speak their vows to one another.

Or take another example from our own family tradition when, the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century what came to called “Church of Christ” congregation split off from the Disciples of Christ. Part of why this happened had to do with a differing view about what was allowed or not in worship. For you see, the pipe organ first began to be produced on a mass scale during that time period, making it affordable to many urban and county seat churches, not just to huge cathedrals. Organ company salesmen began showing up in the offices of pastors and church leaders, showing them how their congregation could be the first church on the square to own a fine, new organ. And you can bet that those congregations that had the wherewithal, jumped at the chance! But a lot of the smaller and poorer and often more rural congregations were poor could never hope to raise the money for a piano, let alone an organ. Guess what? They began to notice that there is no mention of organs or pianos in the Bible. Here is a quote from one of the Disciples denomination magazines in 1867 from a man who was soon to be found in a non-instrumental congregation:

*We by no means object to a well trained choir, made up of the faithful members of the church, and especially of the young. We do not even object to a **good** instrument, (such as the guitar...) But those. . .wheezing, grunting (organs) we do most heartily oppose!<sup>2</sup>*

Isn't it funny how we have come full circle and in some congregations it is the organ or piano that is considered traditional, but the guitar, one of those stringed instruments actually mentioned in the Bible and thus okay to the writer in 1867, is now often

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<sup>2</sup>American Christian Review for March 1867 as quoted in Garrison & DeGroot, The Disciples of Christ: a History. (St. Louis: Bethany Press) 1958. p.344. Emphasis mine.

associated with “contemporary” music?

The point of all this? This or that particular worship practice is not necessarily rooted in scripture. And yet the **importance** of worship – why we worship, in fact, why we do this strange thing every Sunday morning – is something that the Bible is utterly clear and consistent on. How so? Well, let’s now go back to Isaiah. We wouldn’t necessarily label this as a worship service, but it is. And rightly understood, it tells us **why** we worship! It powerfully illustrates that worship is not supposed to be a discussion about God; it is not simply a time where we can turn off our brains and sink into a routine that is as comfortable and comforting as an old pair of slippers. No, the story of Isaiah’s call shows us that worship is supposed to provide us with holy and awesome encounter with the Living God! Let’s hear more, then, of Isaiah:

In the year 740 B.C.E., a young man walked into the temple in Jerusalem. He was probably in his twenties. Who knows what he was thinking as he came to worship. But I bet it wasn’t unlike the things you and I think of on our way to worship. Maybe he was thinking about the weather. Maybe he was thinking about work or worrying about a member of his family. Maybe he was too sleepy to think about much of anything. But who can say on that day how dimly or how acutely Isaiah was thinking of God. However, by the time he left worship, he could think of nothing else. You see, something happened to him there. It turned out to be the **single, most defining moment of his life**. And the man who went out of the temple that day was not the same one who had come in that morning.

Now most of us here don't come to worship expecting life-changing experiences. We don't come to worship to get our lives shaken up. There's plenty out there in the world that will do that. And so, often, we come in here in order to find some measure of peace. We come here to get our lives calmed-down, not stirred up. We come to get our hearts filled, not to have them poured out. We come in order to get restored for the week ahead not transformed for the rest of our lives. That's why Isaiah's language is so strange and can even be frightening to us. And that's the very reason, I think, that it's so important that we spend some time looking at this Biblical encounter with God. Because these words aren't just about Isaiah. They are a model, really, for what happens to any of us whenever we have an authentic encounter with the living God.

Isaiah sees the majesty and the mystery of God and his first response is amazement and wonder; the first response to an authentic encounter with the holy is profound reverence. "Holy, holy, holy . . ." Isaiah himself isn't the one to find the words to express it. He is too astonished and perhaps frightened to speak. The words are cried out from the heavenly creatures that the Hebrew language calls seraphim. And each of them has six wings, with two wings covering their faces-shielding their eyes from the glory of God; with two wings covering the body. And with two wings they fly up and up and up. They fly in adoration and love and in gratitude toward God. And they sing! They sing back and forth to each other like an antiphonal choir: *Holy, holy, holy!*

It really isn't very much like what we think of as worship, is it? And part of that is because, as I said in my sermon last week, when we talk of the second person of the Trinity – Jesus – what we are really wanting to say and emphasize is that God is personally related to us, close to us, cares about us, is not far away and distance and

other and aloof. And those are indeed essential things to remember. In fact, I am proud of the fact that in this congregation and in our Disciples family of congregations in general, we have done a pretty good job of talking about and emphasizing the gentle, intimate love of God. And goodness knows that in this irritable era in which we live, with incivility abounding and pronouncements from too many folks about an angry God all around us, it is important – and I have preached on it countless times – to remember that God is love and God is graciousness and God is tenderness. All of those things are true. But there are times that we also need to be reminded and we need to come to worship to encounter the **holiness** of God. Why? Well, my friends, especially in times when, as theologian Paul Tillich put it, the “foundations shake,” when life spins, when uncertainty and anxiety and worry and grief come to the fore, or even when simply the prospect of change that is good is on our doorsteps, it is precisely then we may need to encounter, indeed, a Holy God, one who IS completely other than us, transcendent, perfect, and who is not therefore dismayed or worried by that shaking going on but who will stand firm when we threaten to topple, who will not be dismayed earthly life is dispiriting or disquieting. There are times, my friends, when we need to know and be reminded in our worship that God is holy, holy, holy, and that it is not the time to hunker down, huddle up, but to come to worship even amidst the shaking to expect to be transformed, to expect to have our own lips and hearts touched, to expect to be changed.

How do we do that? Well, I am going to leave you with one idea about how we do that, and it’s a challenge for you and for me in the coming weeks and months. And actually, I can’t claim credit for this, because what I am about to say is something I

heard once from one of you and it has stayed with me ever since. You see, I was once talking with one of you and you said this to me

*You know, Pastor, I left worship last Sunday annoyed and even angry. I didn't like the sermon, and I really hated a couple of the hymns. I just didn't get anything out of worship. But you know what, I prayed this week and I heard God saying this to me: "Well, my child, what did you **bring** to worship? What did you offer Me when you came to worship? Did you come to worship expecting and hoping to be changed, or did you just want to cuddle with Me?"*

Pretty striking words, no? And then this person went on to say to me

*So, Pastor, this week I decided that what I needed to do was to come to worship asking not what I would receive, not looking simply and only for how worship would meet my needs, but asking how the worship service might be a blessing to others. And so, when there was a hymn I didn't much like, then what I did was pray to God that it was a hymn that would touch someone else and bring them closer to God. Or, when someone said something in the "Moment for God" that I didn't understand, I said a prayer of thanksgiving that God had touched their lives in ways that mattered.*

And then, this person concluded:

*Did worship today meet all of my needs? No. But I think that God is trying to show me that He knows my needs better than I do, and is trying to teach me how I can be a changed person, one who is not quite so focused on myself – and the first step is to come to worship each Sunday asking not "What will I get out of*

*this?” but “What can I give this day?”*

Now, this story isn't nearly as dramatic as the transformation that Isaiah underwent as God touched him and transformed him and sent him forth, but it is no less profound! Holy, holy, holy – may the Lord touch and transform each of us as we seek God this and ever day. Amen.