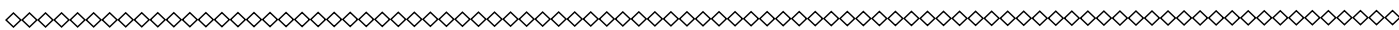




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Sermon Brief
Text: Isaiah 6:1-13
Title: Worship: Encountering God
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today we continue our exploration of the biblical idea of worship. Last week we looked at a central feature of Christian worship in James 1:19-27: the heart of worship is proper hearing the Word of God proclaimed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When God speaks to us in worship through His Word we are changed in order to obey Him.

In the experience of the prophet Isaiah, described in Isaiah six, we discover another closely related perspective on worshipping God. This aspect of worship is critically important as well to authentic worship as taught in scripture. We need to grasp it as well, if we are to genuinely worship God.

Turn in your Bibles to Isaiah chapter six, as I read the text from the New Revised Standard Version.

1 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. 2 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. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 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!"

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 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." 8 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!" 9 And he said, "Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." 11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.

The setting of this passage is important, and is signaled in verse one: "In the year that King Uzziah¹ died." Although the exact year of this event is difficult to determine, King Uzziah of Judea, the southern kingdom, past away in the early 740s to late 730s BCE. He had been essentially a good king and during his long fifty-two year reign the southern kingdom had prospered and enjoyed relative peace and stability. Consequently, he was a much beloved ruler and his death created a huge uncertainty over the future of the nation. In this situation the prophet Isaiah comes to the temple in Jerusalem to worship and seek God along with His reassurance that the future will be okay for the nation. In the experience of worship God comes to the prophet in dramatic revelation that changes the prophet forever.

Out of that experience of Isaiah in worship we can learn valuable insights into the true nature of wor-

¹"Uzziah [N] [H] [S]

a contracted form of Azari'ah the Lord is my strength.

One of Amaziah's sons, whom the people made king of Judah in his father's stead (2 Kings 14:21 ; 2 Chr 26:1). His long reign of about fifty-two years was "the most prosperous excepting that of Jehosaphat since the time of Solomon." He was a vigorous and able ruler, and "his name spread abroad, even to the entering in of Egypt" (2 Chronicles 26:8 2 Chronicles 26:14). In the earlier part of his reign, under the influence of Zechariah, he was faithful to Jehovah, and "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 15:3 ; 2 Chr 2 Kings 26:4 2 Kings 26:5); but toward the close of his long life "his heart was lifted up to his destruction," and he wantonly invaded the priest's office (2 Chronicles 26:16), and entering the sanctuary proceeded to offer incense on the golden altar. Azariah the high priest saw the tendency of such a daring act on the part of the king, and with a band of eighty priests he withstood him (2 Chronicles 26:17), saying, "It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense." Uzziah was suddenly struck with leprosy while in the act of offering incense (26:19-21), and he was driven from the temple and compelled to reside in "a several house" to the day of his death (2 Kings 15:5 2 Kings 15:27 ; 2 Chr 26:3). He was buried in a separate grave "in the field of the burial which belonged to the kings" (2 Kings 15:7 ; 2 Chr 26:23). "That lonely grave in the royal necropolis would eloquently testify to coming generations that all earthly monarchy must bow before the inviolable order of the divine will, and that no interference could be tolerated with that unfolding of the purposes of God, which, in the fulness of time, would reveal the Christ, the true High Priest and King for evermore" (Dr. Green's Kingdom of Israel, etc.) ["Uzziah," Easton's Bible Dictionary online]

shipping God. The one central theme that I want to stress today is that ‘worship changes.’ It changes our understanding of God and it changes us, especially our commitments to God.

BODY

I. Worship changes our understanding of God, vv. 1-5

1 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. 2 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. 3 And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” 4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 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!”

Worship changes our understanding of God. This was a major aspect of Isaiah’s experience of worship. In the midst of worship Isaiah saw a vision of God that he hadn’t known before. Out of that new, enlarged understanding of God then came changes to his own life. Most importantly he found a direction for his life from this experience of worship.

What did Isaiah learn about God?

First, and most importantly, he came to a new appreciation of the greatness and awesome power of God. Notice the first two verses: “ I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 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.”

The so-called throne room vision of Isaiah here helped the prophet realize that **the God of Israel is sovereign and is in absolute control of His creation**. He sets in the place of ultimate power over all creation: the throne of Heaven. The throne is elevated higher than anything else in the room, thus signifying absolute control and power. God’s glorious presence fills the room with the image of his robes filling the temple. The entire heavenly hosts of creatures stand ready to do His bidding at a moment’s notice. Absolute obedience to Him dominates those permitted to be present before God.

This vision of God came to the prophet early on in his adult life so that it would shape him the remainder of his days. It came also at a critical time in the history of the southern kingdom. With an uncertain future at the death of King Uzziah, the vision of God brought reassurance to the prophet and then to the nation that God remained in control of Israel’s future; it did not depend upon any single individual. What would happen to the nation would depend upon God, not upon any leader. Isaiah needed to be reminded of this. Not just for himself, but also for the ministry he would have to the people.

We all go through times of uncertainty in our life. Sometimes a quail serene life gets tossed over into turbulence and chaos. We ‘loose control’ of our life and fear can quickly grip us and cripple us. What do we do? We can let fear paralyze us into doing nothing while we watch our life sink into ruin. We can try to bring stability through our own determination and self efforts. Or, we can reach out to God as His people and experience the renewing understanding of who it is that we worship and serve. Out of such encounters with Almighty God will come quietness of spirit, stabilizing confidence about the future, and renewed commitment to serve God. This was the option that the prophet Isaiah chose. I urge you to make the same choice.

Additionally as the people of God, we need to be reminded of the control of God over us as His people. The nation of Judah had come to look to their king for stability and direction in the affairs of the country. Perhaps many of them forget who stood behind and over their human leader. Certainly the prophet needed such a reminder. The future of God’s people never ever solely depends upon a human leader! To think like this is false and dangerous. What happens to God’s people always depends ultimately upon the Lord God of this universe. We must never forget this. During this period of leadership transition in our church we must not loose sight of this fundamental reality. The future of the IBC church Cologne does not depend upon the pastor! It lays completely in the hands of the Lord God of this universe.

Second, and just as important, Isaiah came to a new understanding of **God’s holiness**. Note verse three: “**And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’**” What does the text mean here? The seraphs proclaimed God’s holiness and declared that it filled the whole earth with His glory. The idea of holiness fundamentally means God’s ‘otherness.’² God is different; He is not a man. No limitation of power on Him exists; no lack of understanding is present; no inability to carry

²“*Holy One*. Of the fifty-six lexical attestations to God’s holiness in the Old Testament, many include the name/title of “The Holy One” or “Holy One of Israel,” which occurs thirty-one times in the Old Testament, twenty-five occurrences being in Isaiah. The demand for human holiness is rooted in divine holiness or cleanness (Lev 19:2; 21:6). The “entrance liturgies” stress the importance of moral and ritual cleanness (Psalm 15; 24:3-6). Holiness speaks of God as supraworldly, as “Other,” and as one virtually unapproachable in majesty (1 Sam 6:20; Isa 6:3; 33:14-16).” [Elmer A. Martens, “God, Names of,” Baker’s Evangelical dictionary of Biblical Theology online]

out His will is present; no corruption morally or spiritually exists in Him. God is holy. The triple declarations of the seraphs underscores the ultimate of holiness in the very being and character of Almighty God.

This core idea of holiness in the Old Testament laid the foundation for the extension of the idea to behavior and morality. It is picked up here in the second part of the song of the seraphs: “the whole earth is full of his glory.” God’s holiness is revealed by His decisions and by His actions. Thereby we sense His presence, His glory, in our midst. God always does what is right by His standards of correctness. His actions are always holy, that is, consistent with who He is as the Holy One of Israel.

This means that God moves in our lives correctly and properly. He will deal with us as a church according to His own holy character. For the prophet, this understanding would be critical. When God’s job assignment to Isaiah is given as described in verses 9-13, the prophet would need this understanding of God’s holiness to accept the difficult ministry assignment given him.

We must at all costs resist the fleshy tendency to define what is right for God to do in our life and in our world. Secular man, tries all the time, to tell God what to do. Sometimes the people of God succumb to this same nonsense. “God, do this; do that,” we say. But such is sinful arrogance on our part. Certainly it has no place in true worship of God. Just the opposite was what Isaiah experienced. God came to the prophet; His heavenly messengers announced to the prophet that God as a holy God sovereignly acted in this world according to His will and not by human demands.

Worship then changes us. True worship changes our understanding of God. Now we see the Lord God as in absolute control of our life, our church, our world. His holy character means that He will act in this world according to who He is, and not according to who we want Him to be. Out of such worship we come to accept this understanding and to submit ourselves unconditionally to Him.

II. Worship changes our commitments to God, vv. 6-13

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 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.” 8 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!” 9 And he said, “Go and say to this people: “Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.” 11 Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

The second half of chapter six focuses on Isaiah’s response to his encounter with God in the Jerusalem temple. Two aspects are emphasized in these verses. First, Isaiah was ‘cleansed’ and second he was commissioned to serve God. The cleansing of the prophet was preparatory for the commissioning. Some invaluable lessons emerge here for us today.

First, the prophet was cleansed of his sinfulness. Note verses six and seven: “6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 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.’ ”

The ritual of purging Isaiah’s sins here paralleled the required ritual for entering the temple in Jerusalem to worship God. It foreshadows the idea of repentance and confession of sin in the demands of Jesus for entrance into the Kingdom of God, cf. Mk 1:14-15.

The purging began with the prophet’s acknowledgement of his sinfulness in the presence of a holy God (cf. v. 5): “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!’ ” Genuine worship will overwhelm us with the awesomeness of Almighty God. In this intense experience of awe and reverence, we then realize our own unworthiness to stand before such a God. Isaiah felt crushed by his uncleanness. Here we see the heart of biblical repentance. We are forced to look at ourselves honestly and what we see isn’t pretty. And we feel deep guilt and unworthiness.

The Hebrew text of the first part of Isaiah’s confession is important to understand: “Woe is me! I am lost.” The literal meaning of the Hebrew verb is “I am silent.” The prophet has an impulse to join the praise of the seraphs, but because of his uncleanness before God he dares not utter a word! Praise from unclean lips would be an affront to God and would bring down divine wrath upon him. Only the clean lips of the seraphs can utter God’s praises in worship at this point. O how we need to learn this principle of genuine worship of God!

Once the prophet confessed his uncleanness to God, then the divine action of purging his sins took place. The live coal taken from the altar and then put forth to touch Isaiah's mouth symbolically reflects the divine forgiveness and cleansing that was understood from the temple sacrifices offered up by the worshipper; cf. Lev. 12:12. Then the seraph declares God's removal of Isaiah's guilt and the cleansing of his sin.

What a wonderful moment for Isaiah! He is now cleansed. Now he can join in the praise of God with the seraphs. But wait! The cleansing wasn't primarily for him to be able to praise God in the temple. It had a deeper, more far ranging purpose. Verses 8-13 describe that.

Second, the prophet was commissioned to serve. See verses 8-13 for this: "8 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!' 9 And he said, 'Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.' 11 Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said: 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.' The holy seed is its stump."

Before Isaiah could utter words of praise to God, God spoke to him: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then the prophet was permitted to speak. But it wasn't to praise God; it was to volunteer to go to work for God! Now it becomes clear why God needed to cleanse the prophet. It wasn't primarily so the prophet could sing God's praises in the temple. Rather, it was so that the prophet could go to work serving God! Our salvation and our worship of God is not primarily for our benefit, nor for God's. God saves us and we worship Him fundamentally to prepare ourselves to serve Him.

My people, we must catch this vision of worship! We don't come to church to entertain ourselves. We don't worship God to make us feel good. We don't even worship in order to make God feel good. First, and foremost, worship is to prepare us to serve God. We come to listen to God speak to us out of His word so we know what we're supposed to be doing in His service. We encounter God in all His fullness because this vision of God's greatness is what will sustain us in serving Him.

The job assignment that Isaiah received was one of the hardest jobs that God could ever give to someone. Verses 9-13 describe this task given to Isaiah. In essence he was to prepare the people of the southern kingdom for the destruction of their country. Isaiah's preaching of God's word to the nation would be of coming destruction of Jerusalem and of the southern kingdom. God would bring down the fire of His wrath on the nation and most of them would perish. The survivors would be carried away in captivity to a far off land to live. The glimmer of hope is contained in the last phrase: "The holy seed is its stump." The desolation of the land would be extreme. But a small segment would survive and become the 'remnant' from which God would rebuild the nation. Chapters 7-12 will amplify this concept.

Now that's a hard job assignment. You may think God has given you a hard job to do in the church. But no job anywhere in our church compares with the difficulty of Isaiah's. Ours are mostly positive and encouraging. To be sure, they will contain moments of difficulty and hardship. But they're nothing in comparison. We should be thankful for this. And we should serve without complaining or fussing because of this.

CONCLUSION

Worship! What is it? As we learned last week, it is listening to God speak to us from His Word. Today, we understand worship to be a life changing encounter with God that prepares us to serve Him in the task that He assigns us to do.

Are you truly worshipping God?