

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Trinity Sunday
Sunday, May 26, 2024
10am

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

Theme: Ascribe to God: All-Consuming Presence

[prayer]

How often do we show up to worship expecting to meet God? Not just to hear and learn about God, but genuinely expecting to encounter God's presence in this place? Genuinely expecting this ground to be holy and this moment to be sacred?

Perhaps you can say with your whole heart, "Every Sunday, pastor!" But I also understand if your honest answer is, "Not always," because that is my honest answer, too. A lot can distract us from the experience of worship. We come to this space carrying with us every good and bad thing that happened the week before, and every worry and hope we have for the week ahead. We come lamenting and we come rejoicing. We come with aches in our bodies and pain in our hearts from things that were done to us and things we did to other people. We come feeling lonely or we come excited to reconnect with friends. We come hoping to sing our favorite hymn. We come hoping the sermon won't be too long or boring. We come thinking about the list of things we need to do. Perhaps worship is just one more thing on that list.

The theme here is that worship so easily becomes about us when it's really about God. This is not to say we can never bring our desires and needs to worship. We can absolutely bring them. But when we arrive, we must be willing to turn them over to God. The psalmist commands us to *ascribe* or *give* to the Lord everything we have inside us. If we are still holding on to these things while we worship, our hands and hearts will be too full to receive what God has to offer. And what God has to offer is God's unadulterated presence.

Worship is about being in the presence of God. God's presence gathers us in. God's presence feeds and nourishes us. And then God's presence sends us back out into the world to love and serve the Lord by loving and serving our neighbor.

Last spring, I attended the Northwest Leadership Institute at the Cathedral of the Rockies in Boise. One of the speakers was the Bishop for the Episcopal Diocese of Idaho, the Rt. Rev. Jos Tharakan.¹ Before he became an Episcopalian, Bishop Jos was a Catholic priest. As a young boy he began training in a Catholic seminary. He would get up very early in the morning, like Samuel in the Temple, and he would go and sit behind the altar in the sanctuary. Just sit there in silence. Sometimes he would fall asleep, which was okay. Other times he would hear God speak to him. Mostly though, he simply *existed* in God's presence. Bishop Jos challenged all of us at the conference to spend twenty minutes every day sitting silently in the presence of God. No words. No thoughts, even – just listening for the sound of God breathing.

How do you put into words the deep mystery that is the inner being of our God? The psalmists certainly try. With their help, for the next few weeks we will explore how we experience the doctrine of God: His omnipresence, His omniscience, His immutability, and His omnipotence.

Today the psalmist is complemented by Isaiah's vision of God's all-consuming presence filling the Temple. In his vision Isaiah encounters the first person of the Trinity, the Lord of Hosts, the Divine Other. What makes God other from us is God's radical holiness. This holiness is so perfect, so full of splendor, so glorious, that even the seraphim – six-winged, fiery angels – must cover their faces with their wings because no one can look upon God and live.

Somewhere between 742 and 736 BCE, King Uzziah died. Uzziah was king in Judah; recall that at this time Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Uzziah reigned for fifty-two years (2 Chron 26) and raised Judah to new heights of economic prosperity and military power. But he also tried to change Temple worship. His arrogance eventually cost him his life. Uzziah's death marked the beginning of a decline in Judah's fortunes as the shadow of Assyrian domination spread east into Palestine.

¹ <https://www.episcopalidaho.org/our-bishop>

Uzziah's sin was he forgot there is a sharp distinction between human and holy. This is the realization that hits Isaiah with overwhelming force: We are sinners, we live among sinners, and our world is broken by sin. Just prior to this vision Isaiah had pronounced six prophecies of doom over the Hebrew people for their sinful and disobedient behavior. Now he pronounces the same doom over himself: "Mourn for me; I'm ruined!" (v. 5 CEB). The Hebrew can be translated as "I am silent." In other words, *I am not worthy to join the song of the angels*. Isaiah's immediate response to encountering the presence of God is a profound feeling of unworthiness. The deep mystery of the divine Presence drives him to his knees. He is convinced that his life is about to end. Out of this conviction he wails his confession: "I am a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips" (v. 5).

I remember one time in prayer when I was so overcome by my sin and unworthiness that I ended up prostrate and sobbing on the carpet. I am not prone to dramatic displays of emotion, even in worship. I knew I was truly in the presence of God because of how convicted I felt. It was a humility like I had never experienced before, standing at the precipice of the gulf that lies between my humanity and God's holiness.

Humility and self-awareness are the proper initial responses to God's holiness...
And yet.

The most important word in our Scripture lesson is "yet." Isaiah is consumed by his sin and the sins of his people...*and yet*, he is granted a vision of the heavenly throne. He is filled with guilt and shame and unworthiness...*and yet*, his eyes behold the glory of God.

Scripture teaches us that our sin makes us unworthy to stand in God's presence (Rom 3:23)...*and yet*, our fallen humanity does not automatically disqualify us from that presence. God's grace always has the final word on who will and will not stand.

While Isaiah's lament comes from a deep place of mourning, the realization of his sinfulness also opens him up to the possibility of forgiveness. Lamentations 3 says, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (vv. 22-23 KJV).

God's holiness threatens to consume us like fire, but it does not, because God's mercy quenches the flames.

The fourth chapter of Leviticus outlines what one must do to purify themselves of sin. If a priest sins, he must sacrifice a bull. If the community sins, they must also sacrifice a bull. If a leader sins, he must sacrifice a male goat. If an ordinary person sins, they must sacrifice a female goat or a female sheep. Either way, the blood of the purification offering should be poured out at the base of the temple's altar and the fat burned. "In this way, the priest will make reconciliation for you for the sin you committed, and you will be forgiven" (Lev 4:35).

But Isaiah makes no such offering. He acknowledges and confesses his sin, but there is no animal to slaughter. Instead, a seraph brings him a glowing coal from the altar and touches his lips. "Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed" (v. 7). The seraph pronounces Isaiah free of his guilt and sin. In Scripture, guilt is not an uncomfortable feeling. Guilt is instead the legal responsibility we bear for the consequences of our wrongful actions. When God blots out Isaiah's guilt, those consequences are ended, even erased.

Like Isaiah, we come before God to confess our sin and the sin of the world. We come bearing the consequences of that sin. But the assurance of God's pardon is even stronger than our confession. God's grace and forgiveness burns us clean like a hot coal. God's gracious work is to purge, sanctify, and make us holy. If God's transcendent holiness filled Isaiah with fear and trembling, how much more did his experience of God's grace? It was not only the divine conviction of my unworthiness that had me prostrate on that floor, but also the revelation of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

And out of that forgiveness flows God's calling. It is true that no mortal can stand in the presence of God...*and yet* God can make a mortal His instrument. While Isaiah is lost in a fog of wonder, he overhears God speak: "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?" (v. 8). I imagine God's voice sounded like the psalmist describes in Psalm 29. Like thunder. Like the roar of the ocean. Like a hurricane-strength wind, snapping and hurling the mightiest of oaks.

God is addressing the heavenly council; he is not addressing Isaiah. Isaiah is only able to hear the voice of the Lord because he has confessed his sin and been

purified. Only after this act of profound humility and vulnerability is he able to receive God's commission, to take the place of the angels and serve as God's divine messenger on the earth: "Here I am; send me."

Isaiah's encounter with the presence of God prepared him to receive his call. God calls us in the same way. We move from an awareness of the mysterious (and sometimes frightening) presence of God, to conviction and confession of our sin, to receiving pardon and forgiveness. Only then are we able to hear and surrender to God's call. But mark my words: When we encounter God, we always walk away changed.

The lectionary ends our Scripture lesson with Isaiah volunteering for a ministry he knows nothing about. If we keep reading, we find out that he is being commissioned to deliver a proclamation of judgment to the Hebrew people. God commands Isaiah to prophesy until all of Israel lies ruined and devastated. God will send the people into exile and cut them down to a stump. Eventually that stump will become the holy seed for a new, revitalized nation (vv. 9-13).

There is peril in saying yes to God. We never know completely what God is calling us to. But when we open ourselves to the all-consuming presence of God, we can do nothing less than respond with our full obedience, trusting that the grace of God that meets us in our weakness will sustain us through whatever challenges lie ahead. God meets us where we are. God uses our worship to transform us. And then God sends us into the world as His messengers.

Today we enter the long church season of Ordinary Time. This is a season for grounding ourselves in the presence of God in our daily lives. This is a season to ask questions, to discern and experiment. This is a season to discover how God's all-consuming presence calls, equips, and empowers us to go and be disciples beyond the walls of this sanctuary. Sometimes we will have profound experiences like Isaiah. But the presence of God is all around us in the very fabric of our world. To become familiar with and open to God's presence is a lifelong discipleship journey. We must be disciplined in prayer and worship, service and witness, always listening for God's call on our lives. This is not just an individual endeavor, but also the corporate practice of a worshipping community. Give us a fresh vision, Lord! Gather us in, convict us, transform us, and commission us once more for your service! May our lives be consumed by your presence. Amen.