

Enter at Your Own Risk!

Isaiah 6:1-8 (Common English Bible)

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. They shouted to each other, saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God's glory!" The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.

I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the Lord of heavenly forces!" Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed."

Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?" I said, "I'm here; send me."

2,700 years ago, Isaiah the Prophet was called to speak God's word to the people of Israel in a time of change. Uzziah was very popular king, but he died of leprosy. The whole country was in a panic. Isaiah message during this national crisis was simple: trust God and don't put your trust in anything else.

Isaiah may have been a priest before he was God's spokesman. He was familiar with worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. He experienced the awe, wonder and mystery of that sacred space. The Temple was considered God's dwelling place on earth.

At the heart of the temple was room called the "Holy of Holies." It was so sacred, only the High Priest entered it on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The room was empty except for a single empty throne. Two gold cherubim spread their wings above it facing each other over the place where God Almighty resided.

The high priest's job inside the "Holy of Holies" was to utter God's name. It was a name made up of four Hebrew consonants - in English: YHWH. It was a name so holy no one dared say it. Even the meaning was a mystery - Yahweh: I am who I am.

According to tradition the other priests tied a rope around the high priest's leg before entering the Holy of Holies. The rope was in case he was struck down in the presence of God. They could drag him out without putting themselves at risk.

This image stands in stark contrast to our comfortable and accessible worship on Zoom or when we return to in-person in our sanctuary. We need to recover a sense of the sacred, a sense divine awe and wonder, a sense of holy majesty and mystery. We need to remember who we come to worship.

Anne Dillard offers similar advice in her book, Teaching a Stone to Talk. She asks: *“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats in church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may return and draw us out to where we can never return.”*

I wonder what would happen if I posted Dillard’s words as a warning on the email to Zoom Worship? Or what if we posted signs on the outside doors of the sanctuary that said: “Enter at Your Own Risk!” Would any of us show up?

I’m happy to announce that after 14 months we are gathering for worship in our sanctuary again. Praise God! We’re going to re-open next week at 10 am on Pentecost Sunday, May 23. It’s the birthday of the church and God’s gift of the Spirit, so wear red and be ready to party. I know it will feel good to be in that familiar sacred space, but it might also feel a little different.

Over the past year, we’ve been faithful about doing Zoom worship and we’ve got folk who don’t live in the valley that join us regularly. Going forward, we’ll have a hybrid worship with both in-person and Zoom participation. We want our out-of-town worshippers to continue with us. And you locals can decide if you want to stay at home and worship in your PJs or come to the church. I hope if you’re local, you’ll be there in-person.

We’re also going to continue “following the science” of the NM DOH Covid safety guidelines. The Session and I are monitoring the changing situation with regard to the CDC’s new update on mask wearing and social distancing for vaccinated people. As soon as we figure out this new situation, we’ll inform you about our guidelines for worship. Just know that any safety measure we implement is to protect one another and the most vulnerable in our community.

Now let’s back to that sign - “Enter at Your Own Risk!” We need to post one, not because of Covid, but to remind us why we gather and who we come to worship. Isaiah understood the importance of divine centered worship.

In our scripture reading, Isaiah saw God seated upon a high throne. Seraphim - mythical creatures shaped like lions with human heads and multiple wings - were present. With one pair they covered their eyes from God’s blinding glory, with another they hide their nakedness, and with the last pair they flew around and sang, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God’s glory!”

As the seraphim sang, the architecture of heaven trembled. Smoke like a cloud of mystery filled the room. Faced with such mystery and wonder Isaiah cried out, “Mourn for me; I’m ruined!” He confessed that he was lost and a man of unclean lips.

One of the seraphim flew over with a hot coal and touched his lips. Another seraph spoke a word of forgiveness. At the end of the vision, God asked, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah responded, “Here I am, send me.”

This dream is a vision of heavenly worship. Isaiah and the seraphim make up the congregation. God is God. It begins with praise where worship should begin. Then there’s confession and forgiveness. After that the word of God is heard in the form of a rhetorical question: “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah the worshipper responds to that word and is sent out into the world with a job to do.

If you think about it, that's what we do in worship. We sing our praise. Then we own up to our shortcomings in a prayer of confession. We experienced God’s forgiveness. And then we hear God’s word in scripture and sermon. At the end, we leave with a job to do – to be God’s people and to work for God’s glory.

Our weekly worship is similar to Isaiah’s experience with a few exceptions. We don’t have seraphim flying around singing and shaking everything with the sound of their voices. We don’t have a smoke-filled room with the Almighty sitting high and lifted up. Our worship is rather plain and predictable in comparison.

We’re like the churches Don McCollough describes in his book *The Trivialization of God*: “*Visit a church on a Sunday morning – almost any will do – and you will find a congregation comfortable relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal position, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or a sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether the sermon will go over; the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing...*”

“Enter at Your Own Risk!” As we prepare for in-person/hybrid worship next week, we need to remember and reclaim our center and focus. Do we come to worship expecting an encounter with the living God like Isaiah or not?

Brothers and sisters, worship is about turning toward a power greater than us. It’s about spending one hour a week focusing on God instead of ourselves. It’s about reorienting ourselves and turning our lives right side up. In worship, you and I are given the opportunity to surrender our pretense to be little gods.

You and I tend to see ourselves as the center of the universe. I’m the one around which everything revolves. Life is judged according to its effect on me. Other people are valued for their usefulness to me. Events are judged good or bad by how they help or hinder me.

But when I gather with God’s people to worship on Zoom or in-person, I am given the opportunity to turn away from myself. I am invited to re-center myself on the One who is the real center of the universe.

And if I do, if I climb off the little throne where I like to sit and pretend to be god then I realize something important. I realize that God is God and I am not. That's the way life is supposed to be.

Isaiah participated in the heavenly worship service with fear and trembling. He understood the risk. That's why he cried out "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the Lord of heavenly forces!"

Isaiah understood that God was God and he wasn't. He gave himself over to God and was given a job to do. "Here I am, Lord! Send me."

Beloved, worship is, first and foremost, about God. Worship is an opportunity to give ourselves to God. Worship is a chance to lose ourselves in the Absolute. Worship is a time to re-center on our Creator. Worship is an occasion to practice not being God.

"O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For (the Lord) is our God, and we are the people of (God's) pasture, and the sheep of (God's) hand." (Ps. 95.6-7)

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