

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

You may notice that on the front of the balcony up there is a banner that reads, “Serve the Lord.” It is intentional that it can be read only if you facing toward the back, specifically when you are leaving. We are in here for a service of worship, but we leave to serve the Lord by serving the world. Our reading from Isaiah informs us that our worship is not to be some kind of escapism from the world. When we exit the worship service in this building, we enter the world we are called to serve.

Our reading from Isaiah is an account of Isaiah’s response to God’s invitation to serve. You have heard me say tell the story of the preacher who was having difficulty in the church he was serving. The session called a special meeting to work with the pastor. One of them asked him how he originally sensed his call from God. The young pastor said that he was working on his father’s farm, when he saw a cloud formation that said “PC,” which he interpreted “Preach Christ.” One elderly session member mumbled, “I think he meant plow corn. The passage begins with an account in the throne room of heaven where God is, high and lifted up in splendor. It could very well be that Isaiah was in the Jerusalem Temple for Isaiah’s description of his vision includes elements found in the Temple. The Israelites saw the Temple as God’s abode. God was surrounded by awesome and impressive attendants to the divine presence. These attendants are the seraphim, the heavenly winged creatures of God in rapt attentiveness, utterly devoted to God. Fluttering around the Holy One, honoring and covering him in order to guard and enhance God’s holiness. God massively occupies and dominates the heavenly throne room to which Isaiah is given access. The primary

activity in this throne room is praise: an unending doxology of the divine choir. Notice how the passage begins with praise, praise of God.

This overwhelming sense of God's holiness evokes a massive contrast. Isaiah now has a fresh sense of himself, having stood in the holiness of God. This sense of himself is that of sin: "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!" Have you ever had the experience of having something white, thinking it is pure white. But then you place it against something that is even more white, and then you realize your white is not as white as it can be. Likewise, in the presence of Almighty God, Isaiah senses his sinfulness, and thus declares himself a sinner.

Yet God has a way of reclaiming us. Here is another act of God's forgiveness. One of the seraphim takes a hot coal from the altar and placed it on Isaiah's lips, cleansing Isaiah's lips, after Isaiah confessed that he was a sinner, a man of unclean lips. Heat cleanses. I was taught that if I try to get a splinter out of my finger with a needle, light a match and heat the end of the needle to sterilize it. Me, I would rather have soap in my mouth than hot coals! The seraph proclaims, "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Isaiah is forgiven. And then, after hearing God's invitation, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah volunteers. He responds to God's call to mission, to service.

Note here that our worship follows the pattern of Isaiah's call. Worship begins with a hymn of praise. And then being in the presence of God, we sense our sinfulness. We confess our sins, and we hear God's word of forgiveness. We then hear God's word, spoken and proclaimed, and then we respond. The movement is praise,

confession, forgiveness, word read and proclaimed, and responding with service. Isaiah describes the Lord of Hosts as completely and divinely Other, the God who is worthy of eternal adoration, glory, and praise. Wherever God dwells, there is worship; God's praise never ceases.

At the same time, this passage is God's call to Isaiah. In the midst of this worship, Isaiah hears his call. Isaiah's particular call was to be a prophet. A biblical prophet was not one who could predict the future. Rather a prophet was simply a spokesperson for God. God would give the prophet a message to proclaim, and the prophet would proclaim it. Thus this account declares that Isaiah's call to mission, his call to ministry, stems from a visionary worship experience.

This passage informs us, reminds us, that worship cannot be separated from service. Unfortunately, there tends to be a dualism: worship is seen as sacred and mission is secular; worship is spiritual, service is material. It is a misconception to think that worship should have nothing to do with the material world. We have created an artificial dualism between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material. This dualism is not a part of the reformed understanding of our faith. Everything is sacred. Nothing is outside God's realm, not even politics.

The concept of the incarnation, God coming to us in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ, is crucial in connecting the sacred with the secular, the spiritual with the material. Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation, God coming in human form. Jesus is God's son. At Christmas we hear the word "Emmanuel," quite frequently, which means God with us, with us in bodily form, God being in material form. The mystery of the incarnation announces that this world is of utmost importance.

Good took on human form for this human realm, the world, is good. When God created the universe, he declared, “And it was good.” On five of the seven days God created the world, we read that God saw it was good. When he completed creation at the end of the sixth day, we read, “God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” The created world, matter, is good! There is nothing evil or bad about the material.

We are embodied people. We are people with physical, tangible bodies. God created us out of the dust of the earth. As Christians we do not believe that we are only bodies, physical, biological beings who operate with biological, chemical, and electrical processes. We are more than that. Nor do we believe that we are souls, who for the time being, have bodies. “The real me” cannot be understood apart from “the embodied me.” When we find the Greek word for “soul” in the New Testament, it did not mean some kind of disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body, but rather to what we would call the whole person or personality. We are not deathless souls that shed bodies when we die, as though the body is something we need to get rid of. Rather, we are embodied mortals being given new and glorified bodies at our death by the grace and power of God. Our belief in the resurrection is a belief of the bodily resurrection. Our bodies are not inherently evil, something we need to shed.

Because we are embodied people, we need tangible things, material things. We make a connection between the material and spiritual in our sacraments. We use material things to have a spiritual, holy encounter with Jesus Christ. In this sacrament we meet the living Christ, both in Scripture and at the table where Jesus is the host.

Through the material, the tangible, we experience the presence of Jesus Christ. As embodied people, we need something tangible.

So it is worship and mission, not worship or mission. We cannot separate the two. They intrinsically bonded, two sides of the same coin. Our liturgy cannot be escapism. When we have an encounter with the living God, we cannot escape the world that God created and that God loved. There is a church in Iowa that has hanging on the wall in fellowship hall, a piece of needle work, which reads. "Are you so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly good?"

All power and glory, wisdom and wonder
be to the Lord our God,
who strengthens us through the word
and blesses us with peace. Amen.