

DISCIPLINES FOR DEEPER DISCIPLESHIP, PART VII:
PRAISE THE LORD OR CHANGE THE WORLD
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
MARCH 2, 2008–FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
THE LESSON FOR THE DAY–ISAIAH 6:1-8
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“**I**n the year that King Uzziah died,” writes the prophet Isaiah, “I saw the Lord high and lifted up.”

The year King Uzziah died is 742 BC, and Jerusalem was not an entirely happy place to be just then. Assyria, the world’s only super-power, centered in what is now Iraq and governed by a despot far more frightening and capable than Saddam Hussein, is restless and voracious and seeking smaller satellite nations to eat for lunch. The Jews in Jerusalem can see foreign armies bristling like storm clouds on the horizon, and they desperately need a word of hope, so God appoints—‘anoints’ is probably the better word—Isaiah to bring that good glad word from God.

But before Isaiah can bring a meaningful word from God, Isaiah must meet his God—personally, intimately, face-to-face. One day... Isaiah remembers it well, he will never forget it; when he has forgotten the names of his own children he will still remember this; it was the year King Uzziah died. One day in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah is minding his own priestly business in the Temple when suddenly a sight most human beings are privately glad they never have to experience practically sears his eyeballs out of their sockets. Isaiah sees God sitting on a celestial throne, high and lifted up. God’s robe fills the whole Temple. Strange beings called seraphs with six wings hover above, lauding God’s magnificence with a hymn the Christian Church would memorably co-opt centuries later for its own purposes: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty/All thy works shall praise thy name in earth and sky and sea/Holy, Holy,

Holy, there is none beside thee/Perfect in power, in love, and purity.”

The Temple’s pillars tremble but hold as the earth quakes around the cowering prophet, who trembles but holds. Instantly aware of his own lilliputian insignificance, Isaiah, like Wayne and Garth after him, falls flat on his face and protests, “I’m not worthy, I’m not worthy.” With some consternation Isaiah watches a seraph pluck a glowing coal from the altar fire and scurry forward straight for his tender lips, to purify his speech with scorching heat for the work and words of the Lord. A voice cries out: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And with words the Christian Church will later memorably co-opt into a second famous hymn, Isaiah replies, “Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.”

I don’t know if, at church, you’ve experienced anything quite as vivid or compelling as the theophany Isaiah barely survived in the Jerusalem Temple, but the fact is that Isaiah is a prototype for the rest of us: Before the work, the worship. Before we go out into the world to do God’s work and to speak God’s word and to obey God’s will and to follow God’s way, we must meet the God who gives us the work to do, the word to speak, the will to obey, and the way to follow.

It won’t surprise any of us that divine worship is one of the twelve spiritual disciplines that might enliven our walk with God. This, this is where we learn what we need to know; this, this is where we become what we need to be;

this, this is where we are fortified to face the arduous challenges of life in a fast lane strewn with logs to leap and boulders to skirt and floods to ford and detours to puzzle out. The medical diagnosis: malignant. The conference with the boss: unemployed. The difficult child: O God, please show me the way and give me the patience I can't find on my own. The failed marriage: O God, I never planned to live my life alone.

This, this, is where, with songs worn smooth by other voices than our own going back hundreds of years, and with ancient creeds swearing improbable certitudes we didn't write and can barely believe, and with prayers cast aloft from broken hearts with sighs too deep for words, we trace the old, old story of the God who fashioned a vast universe of unspeakable loveliness and continues to hold it fast with strong hands and once invaded the created order in a life which began in a stable, ended on a cross, and all the years between loved the unlovable, welcomed the exiled, refused to flinch from the leper's touch, spoke truth to power, turned water into wine and a little lunch into a lavish banquet for five thousand, and disclosed to us our own often latent humanity.

This is what I learn about the spiritual discipline of corporate worship from this colorful story of Isaiah's inauguration to the ministry: Worship begins with God's glory and ends with God's question.

Worship begins with God's glory. "I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and God's robe filled the Temple, and six-winged seraphs hovered above." The only fitting response is to choir the proper praise: "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God hosts: the whole earth is full of God's glory." That's the only reason we're here. We come partly because we meet our friends here; I'm glad for that; most of us wouldn't trouble ourselves with church if we

didn't meet our friends here. But worship is not a social club. We're here because God is here.

Worship is not a billboard for the advertisement of the church's many other activities. I once preached in a worship service where the announcements were longer than the sermon, so the congregation left church that day pondering the inscrutable mysteries of softball games, potluck suppers, and tag sales.

It's so easy to drift from the main point. One theologian visits a church on Mother's Day and the whole service is devoted to motherhood. The hymns are about motherhood and the scripture is about motherhood, and the sermon extols the virtues of motherhood, and at the beginning of the service the pastor spends ten minutes canvassing the congregation to locate all the hidden mothers—the oldest mother and the youngest mother and the newest mother and we have to check to see if there are any great-grandmothers in attendance and every one gets a long-stemmed rose, and you leave thinking that you spent an hour worshipping motherhood instead of God.

Or you go on Memorial Day weekend and discover on the cover of the bulletin the famed photograph of the Marines hoisting the flag on Iwo Jima, and you sing *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which mentions God once, in the fourth verse, which nobody ever sings because nobody knows the words, and the sermon lists eight reasons why America is the greatest country in the world, and you leave thinking that you have been to a very pleasant patriotic rally indeed.¹

¹These examples of Mother's Day and Memorial day are freely adapted from Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1992), pp. 157-158.

It's so easy to drift from the main point because the main point is so hard. We're all here trying to do something we know full well we can't do: catch a glimpse of the God who is so far above us and so far beyond us we've no hope of ever accomplishing our goal. Aquinas said, "Then alone do we know God truly, when we believe that God is far beyond all that we can possibly think about God."² Corporate worship is a quiet conspiracy of ignorance; the faithful rarely admit that corporate worship is where the ignorant and incompetent gather to attempt the impossible and inconceivable.

Corporate liturgy seems such a shabby instrument for the attainment of the unencompassed light. It's so wordy, so rational, so linear, so earthbound, so small. Luci Shaw's daughter came home from her high school biology class frustrated and depressed. That day the assignment was to dissect a grasshopper. "As if *that's* how you learn anything about grasshoppers," she exclaimed in disgust.³ As if you learn anything about the Ineffable Mystery by tearing it apart with the dull scalpel of words.

Maybe we should try darkness, silence, and blankness instead. Just not say anything. Woody Allen tried that once when he was a student at NYU. On the final exam in his Existential Philosophy class, there are ten questions, and Woody can't answer a single one. He sits there dully for an hour and finally hands in a blank page. The Professor gives him an 'A'; "Brilliant," he scrawls across

Woody's blank test.⁴ By the way, Woody also aces his Metaphysics final, but gets caught cheating. He'd gazed into the soul of the boy sitting next to him. He is promptly expelled.⁵

We keep failing but we keep trying to attain somewhat to the unencompassed light, by stealth and scantily, because God's glory fills the earth and we mean to honor it and adore it. Sometimes it seems ever so bootless and pointless. Every Sunday, we come here to worship and find to our chagrin that it doesn't really make all that much difference the other six days of the week. I know several people who say they don't come to church because it would be ever so much more meaningful to build houses for Habitat every Sunday morning or serve lunch at the homeless shelter or tutor a struggling high school sophomore. In fact, I think, folks who use that excuse rarely manage to show up at the homeless shelter on Sunday morning. Mostly I think they're playing golf or reading *The New York Times*, but they do have a point. Sometimes divine worship seems so ineffective and futile.

I got to thinking about this the other day when I saw this fine film called *Amazing Grace*, about William Wilberforce, the abolitionist British Parliament minister who spent nineteen long years trying to put an end to the slave trade in England and its New World colonies. Nineteen years, finally successful in 1807.

William Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian with a faith rather too robust for the likes of us. He loved to sing. He especially

²Quoted by Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1983), p. 133.

³Luci Shaw, "The Need To Pay Attention: Darkness, Light, and the Visionary Eye," *Weavings*, vol. XVI, #4, July/August, 2001, pp. 21-22.

⁴"Stardust Memories," related by Gary Commins in "Woody Allen's Theological Imagination," *Theology Today*, July, 1987, p. 238. Slightly adapted.

⁵"The Nightclub Years," related by Gary Commins, *ibid.*

loved to sing *Amazing Grace*. The way the movie tells the story anyway, he was a good friend and admirer of John Newton, the ex-slave-ship captain who eventually saw the error of his ways and famously wrote, “I was blind, but now I see.” Wilberforce loved to sing. In the middle of a raucous, well-lubricated party at a gentlemen’s club for aristocrats, he suddenly bursts out in song: “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...”

Midway through his draining struggle against slavery he is so exhausted he wants to quit Parliament, but his good friend William Pitt, who would soon become the youngest Prime Minister in English history, chastises him: “Wilby, do you intend to use your beautiful voice to praise the Lord, or to change the world?”

It’s a good question. What should Wilberforce be doing: singing hymns, or campaigning for abolition? What should we be doing: praising the Lord, or changing the world? Sometimes the praising part seems both tedious and pointless.

But maybe it’s a false choice. Isn’t it just possible that praising the Lord IS changing the world? Isn’t divine worship one of the most subversive and revolutionary activities we could possibly engage in? Every Sunday, for an hour at least, we set up this alternative universe, this ideal world, this world as real or realer than the one we live in the other six days a week, where God is sovereign and not we ourselves. Every Sunday, for an hour at least, we proclaim, “God is sovereign and NOT George Bush. God is Sovereign and NOT my corporation and its stock price. God is sovereign and NOT my puny desires, NOT my ravenous avarice, NOT my enchantment with the world’s vain baubles.” Praising the Lord IS changing the world, at least if we are paying attention to what is really going on.

Divine worship begins with God’s glory: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, heaven and earth are full of God’s glory.” Divine worship begins with God’s glory, and it ends with God’s question: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” “Here am I,” says Isaiah, “Send me!”

During the first two weeks of September in 1942, the Nazis murdered 20,000 Jews in the Polish town of Ludmir. Fifteen escaped to the woods, where they hid till winter came, and then sought shelter at the farm of Nikolai and Mikhail Vavrusevich. For two years they hid in a bunker dug out beneath a shed, until liberation in 1944. Every day Nikolai and Mikhail brought potatoes and beets to sustain the refugees. Every Friday afternoon, they brought one extra potato, hollowed out in the center, where there was a thread dipped in oil, so the Jews could light the Sabbath candle.⁶ These Polish Catholics understood, you see, that worship sustains life as surely as potatoes.

In that small gesture, God’s glory and God’s question came together. ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God of Hosts, who asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Nikolai and Mikhail Vavrusevich answered, “Here am I, Lord. Send me.” Today Nikolai and Mikhail are remembered on the Avenue of the Righteous in Jerusalem.

The Avenue of the Righteous. What a great place to be, till the earth is swallowed up by its dying star, and we join the six-winged seraphs in another world, a world we’re always foreshadowing and practicing for, every seventh day.

⁶Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2003), pp. 7-8.