

Lake Street United Methodist Church

Liturgy

February 4, 2024

Introduction: This is a little different from the usual sermon manuscript that we post on the website, because today, as we think about worship, the entire service is the focus. The service was planned by our youth and Confirmation class, and you should see all the planning, not just read what the preacher said.

GATHERING

*Let us prepare for the Christ light to enter our midst.
As it enters, it changes what was ordinary into extraordinary,
And what was everyday into sacred.
Let us welcome the Christ light into our midst.*

GOD'S MAJESTY

CALL TO WORSHIP

Psalm 8:1-4, 9

¹ O Lord, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

² **Out of the mouths of babes and infants**

**you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.**

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁹ **O Lord, our Lord,**

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

HYMN #98

"To God Be the Glory"

SPECIAL MUSIC

"Praise Ye the Lord"

- J. Jefferson Cleveland

The Ensemble; David Fehr, director

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE and THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

PRAYER RESPONSE # 70

Gloria patri

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen. Amen.**

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Isaiah 6:1-13

Few scriptures describe the encounter with God more vividly than Isaiah. We read his account of his prophetic call from Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1-13.

⁶ 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 remains 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.

God's word for all God's people

Thanks be to God

MEDITATION

"Majesty"

In our youth and Confirmation class over the past couple of months, we have been looking specifically at the concept of "worship." Worship is one of our church's stated values, but that's almost

a given, isn't it? Of *course* a church values worship. If a church doesn't value worship, is it even a church? When we say, "I'm going to church" we usually mean "Going to the weekly worship service, don't we?" But what *is* worship? What is its purpose? One of the ways we got at that question in the class – I mentioned this a few weeks ago, too – was by reducing our normal weekly service to its component parts and asking of each one, "Is this essential to worship?" That was interesting. Some things that we don't do much of were felt to be very important, while other things that we spend a lot of time on were less so. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the pastor's sermon did not score as highly as you might have expected, given how much time we devote to it. Most of the youth were all right with the idea of a sermon and were happy to retain it – most of them – but none of them saw it as central to worship.

Anyway, as we ended the unit, I assigned the youth the task of designing a worship service that would highlight what does matter for the experience of worship, and that's what we're getting today. As those of you who have bulletins can see, the service is broken down into three main parts, focusing on God's Majesty, God's Mystery, and God's Mercy. All three elements appear in the scripture passage that you just heard, from Isaiah 6, which begins: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord."

And there, for those of you taking notes, is our definition. Worship is the encounter with God. It is not to be defined by what form it takes or what elements it involves, but rather by whom it seeks. And a worship service has achieved its purpose not when we learn something new or when we feel encouraged – it's neither a class nor a pep rally – but when we know that we have been in the presence of One who is larger than us. That was definitely Isaiah's experience. He saw a vision of a Presence that filled the temple, accompanied by smoke and thunder and strange creatures who burst into a song of praise before the Lord.

Praise. When the youth finished evaluating all the different elements of our worship service the only element that had a perfect score – that *everyone* agreed was absolutely essential – was praise. Now that is something that we do in our worship services, and like the seraphim, we normally do it through song. We have already done so this morning. So we're good on that one, right?

Well, up to a point. How did Isaiah respond to his vision of the majesty of God? With abject terror. "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!" Indeed, throughout scripture, every person who has a close encounter with God, or even with an angel of God, responds with fear, because to experience the glory of God is also to realize the vast difference between God and us. To encounter God is to be humbled. And *that* we're not as good at. Why that should be is worth a sermon itself, on another day, but for now, it is enough to say that one of the key goals of any worship experience is to recognize and proclaim the beauty of God, even as we humbly acknowledge our own unloveliness.

But worship is more than praise of God's majesty. I invite us now to join together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

GOD'S MYSTERY

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right and a good and joyful thing,
to give thanks to you, in awe, in fear, and in humility.
For you are greater than we can comprehend,
and so we fumbled about ineffectively trying to serve you
With laws, with rules, with temples, with rituals,
but it was not enough. We still failed.
And so you made yourself comprehensible
by becoming one of us, speaking our words,
living our life, and dying our death.
We still do not understand you, but now we can
at least dimly grasp the depths of your love.
And so, with your people on earth
and all the company of heaven
we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us
he took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread
gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Take, eat; this is bread, but now it is more than bread.
It is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over, he took the cup,
gave thanks, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Drink from this, all of you;
this is wine, but it is now more than wine.
It is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,
in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.
By your Spirit, perfect us,
by making us one with Christ,
one with each other,
and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory,
and we feast at his heavenly banquet.
Through your Son Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit in your holy church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father,
now and forever. **Amen.**

HYMN #613

"O Thou Who This Mysterious Bread"

SPECIAL MUSIC

"O What Beauty, Lord, Appears"
Chancel Choir; David Fehr, director

– W. A. Mozart

MEDITATION

"Mystery"

Isaiah's experience with the presence of God was not just overpowering. It was also *weird*! There were these six-winged things there called "seraphim" which is Hebrew for "burning creatures." Wrapped in flame, they flew with two wings and covered themselves with the other four, while they sang praise to God.

And that also is a part of the worship experience: not just fear and humility before God's greatness but also confusion before God's weirdness. It is the realization that we are in the presence of something beyond our understanding, something uncanny and bewildering, something that we have to accept on trust because there is no chance of comprehension. The theological word for that sense of bewilderment and confusion is "mystery." When we come before God, we should *not* be comfortable with everything, should *not* feel as if we completely understand what just happened.

That was an interesting discussion with the youth. What, if anything, do we do in worship that encourages the experience of mystery? And the first thing that came up was Communion. Somehow, in some way that cannot be explained to anyone's satisfaction, not even our own, we have this experience where we taste bread and taste the cup in the presence of others doing the same thing and know that Christ is present. Present where? I asked them. In the elements that we tasted? In the company of those beside us? The youth concluded, "Yes."

Here's another place we find mystery – in music. Does anyone here honestly think they can explain why it is that certain sounds arranged in this way can bring us to tears, but arranged in a different

way can make us unsettled or angry or determined? Why is it that the words of a poem mean something qualitatively more when set to music? It's a mystery, and that is why every worship tradition includes music. Except maybe the Quaker service, and I'm sorry, but that's just sad. When we try to speak of One who is more than all our words, what else can we do but sing?

And the youth pointed out one more place where it may be possible to experience God's mystery – something that we offer very little of usually: silence. So we have built into this service a time of silence.

SILENT MEDITATION

GOD'S MERCY

CHILDREN'S TIME

Today in church we're talking about going to worship and what worship is. Well, in your Sunday class today, you'll hear that the early disciples went to worship every day at the temple. That feels like a lot doesn't it. Well, one day as Peter and John went in to worship, they passed by a beggar, a man who couldn't walk so he couldn't work in the fields, so he lived by asking people to help. Well, one day Peter and John went to the temple to pray, and this day, maybe for the first time, they noticed the man begging by the road. Peter stopped and looked at him, and the man looked up hopefully. "Some coins for a lame man?" he said. Peter replied, "I don't have any. I'm broke. But here's what I *can* give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" Then he took the man's hand, lifted him up, and he could walk! He could run! He could jump! So he did. He began doing laps, shouting at the top of his lungs. And this is important to remember. We've talked today about how in worship we should remember that God is great, and that God is mysterious. But that man hopping up and down at the temple gates reminds us also that God is good.

SPECIAL MUSIC

"You Are My Vision" - arr. Rend Collective Experiment
Isiah Chrouser, Natalie and Wyatt Ahrens

MEDITATION

"Mercy"

We began this service by talking about God's majesty and the importance of praise to the worship experience. I then pushed that a little further by noting that a part of our praise of God should also be an acknowledgement of how little and insignificant and unworthy and unlovable we are in comparison.

Well, that might have sounded a little harsh. Even unhealthy. Haven't we worked hard to get rid of that awful worm theology – "for such a worm as I" – that was so common to earlier generations. Shouldn't we be building people up instead of tearing them down? Isn't God a God of love?

Yes, God is a God of love. Which is why it's important to note that in the experience of worship God does not *leave* us groveling. What happens to Isaiah after he declares "Woe is me! I am unfit to be in the presence of God! I am a man of unclean lips"? One of the fire creatures flies down and takes a live coal out of the temple altar and touches Isaiah's unclean lips. "There. Now they've been cleansed. Your sin is forgiven. Now listen."

Worship should lead to joy, because worship reminds us that as little and unlovely as we are, we have been accepted. We have been forgiven. But we cannot grasp what a gift that forgiveness is until we face our own sin, our own frailty, our own dishonesty with God and others. Unless we realize how unworthy we are to be forgiven, we are going to regard God's forgiveness as cheap. Humility is a prerequisite for joy.

So in the design for today's worship service, the youth requested that we lead to a prayer of confession, followed by an assurance of forgiveness. I invite you to that prayer now. It is easy, as we all know, to read words of a liturgy automatically. Let it not be so today.

PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

**Have mercy upon us, O God, according to your lovingkindness,
According to the multitude of your tender mercies
blot out our transgressions.**

Wash us from our iniquities, and cleanse us from our sins.

For we acknowledge our transgressions; our sin is ever before us.

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a right spirit within us.

Silent prayer

Now, imagine one of the fiery creatures of God touching you with a coal, searing away your sin, and hear the good news: The Lord is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

May the Lord grant us remission of all our sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the consolation of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

HYMN #355

"Depths of Mercy"

SENDING FORTH

I said earlier we would greet each other at the end of the service. Let us do so now, but not just as a social time. You are forgiven by God, and are among a people who have been forgiven by God. Let us bless each other with the passing of the peace.

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

God's peace be with you; *and also with you.*

*BENEDICTION

One final word. As we planned the service around God's Majesty, God's Mystery, and God's Mercy, we didn't really know where to put the offering. Doesn't *really* fit in any of them. We could just skip it, of course. Just kidding, that's not going to happen. So today, our offering baskets are at the doors, near the baskets for the used Communion cups. We invite you to drop off your Connect Cards, offerings, and glasses as you leave. And as you leave . . .

*Let us resolve to take the Christ light with us from this place.
As it goes, it shines light on the darkness, hope on the shadow of death.
Let us bear the light of Christ with us as we go.*

POSTLUDE