

The Awe of Worship

From the series: The Church: Human Community

Text: Isaiah 6:1, 3; Revelation 5:13

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I was thinking about a statement that Paul made in a discussion in his first letter to the Corinthians as I was thinking about the theme of today's worship. It has nothing to do with the theme, actually, but rather, with some domestic matters that he was dealing with in the congregation at Corinth, and at one point he said, "Now, as to thus and so, I have no commands from the Lord, but my opinion is, as one who is faithful and trustworthy, ..." That statement from Paul, when I was being educated into an understanding of scripture and how to interpret it, was claimed to be the inspired word of God as much as anything else Paul wrote, because, after all, Paul wrote it and it's in the Bible.

The inspiration of the scripture - that's a theological doctrine. But, as a matter of fact, I don't believe that anymore. I want to take the words at face value. What Paul was saying is, on this issue, I don't really have a clear word from the Lord. Paul certainly was not conscious in writing the letter to the church at Corinth that he was writing what would be considered scripture by the church, subsequently, although, certainly he had a sense of authority, apostolic authority, and I think what he was saying in this case is there are some things about which I am very certain are reflective of the intention of God, but in this case, I don't know, but let me give you my opinion.

That's what I want to do with you today. Of course, I'm always preaching my opinion. But, it is an understanding or interpretation of a text or a theological doctrine or something. But, today, not so much so. I have certainly biblical text and a biblical basis for what I'm going to say, but I want to say up front that what I'm going to speak about, the congregation, the Church, the human community in worship, involves an opinion on my part. It involves a choice that I have made. The way we worship at Christ Community is a deliberate and intentional choice. There are assemblies all over the globe today in this hour worshipping God in all kinds of settings, using all kinds of liturgy or non-liturgy, in all kinds of feel, mood, mode, posture, and the way any community of faith worships is a deliberate and intentional choice of that community of faith. At least, it is here. In some communities of faith it may just be what has been done forever and forever

and forever. It seems that that was the way it was when I was a kid. Three hymns, two prayers and a long sermon. And I don't know that anyone ever thought about it. But, at Christ Community, we have been very intentional about the way we worship, and I want to talk about that this morning. I want to say again, up front, not as some word from the Lord, but as some intentional, deliberate choice on our part, and so, think with me about the action in which we are presently engaged, the action of worship.

Now, I've already tilted my hand by the very title of the message, "The Awe of Worship." Awe, a little three-letter word, but it carries a wallop. If you would look it up in the dictionary, you'd find that it comes from a Greek word, *achos*, which is defined as fear, and you might find the word "dread" in there, and you might find the word "reverence" and "respect." The Awe of Worship is an attempt to point to that which marks our worship, that gives it its characteristic mark, its mode and mood. It is awe. Now, not fear in the sense of being afraid, but fear in the sense of reverence and deep respect.

The classic study of the religious experience of worship, indeed, of the religious experience itself, was done by a German scholar who died in 1937, Rudolf Otto, and his book is entitled, in English, *The Idea of the Holy*. And he was one of the pioneers in the study of comparative religions and he went around the world tasting, experiencing, analyzing the religious experience of the human family, and he found that at the core was this sense of awe, that there is a deep address to the inner being of the person, there is a feeling which is a knowing, but a "knowing" in quotation marks because it is not a rational knowing, it is supra-rational. It is beyond the ability, intellectually, to analyze. It is a feeling; it is an experience deep, deep down. He speaks about the Holy, or God, using a word he coins from a Latin word, *numen*. *Numen*, in Roman mythology, was the presiding spirit or divinity, and Rudolf Otto, then, in order to coin a new word, to catch attention, and to try to say something in a fresh way, talks about the *numenus*, which is really God. It's the Mystery, however you want to speak of it. But, he noted that universally there is this human experience of the *numenus*, of the Mystery, and he used another Latin phrase, *a mysterium tremendum*, and you can hear the English word "mystery" and "tremendous." Rather crassly, a tremendous mystery. But, *mysterium tremendum* has that kind of sense about it of mystery. Rudolf Otto says that the experience to which we are trying to point this morning, that which is universally at the core of the human experience of God which is evoked in worship, which arises, is a feeling that is beyond explanation. An encounter with the Mystery who is unapproachable.

Maybe it sounds like so much gobbledygook, but I'm trying to speak reasonably, rationally, understandably about a Mystery that cannot be spoken about reasonably, understandably. But, I think you know what I mean. I think you have all, at one time or another, felt it, experienced it; you've known it. And Rudolf Otto says, interestingly enough, that that universal human experience, the awe of that awesomeness beyond our ability to articulate, is that which has with it the

sense of fear or dread or reverence or respect that almost repels us and, at the same time, draws us, allures us. There is that ironic tension within us; we are drawn like a moth to the flame and yet, it is a fearsome, an overwhelming kind of moment and experience. That's the awe of worship. And, at Christ Community, we have made a deliberate choice and with intention seek to create the possibility of that awe happening.

All we can do is build the container. Whether the fire happens or not, whether there is anything evoked in us or not is not at our command or our disposal. That is the mystery of the Mystery.

But, I think you know that we are very intentional and deliberate about the way we worship, about the mood and the mode and the posture and the spirit and the feel of this hour. I'll spend probably three hours tonight on next Sunday morning. I have the pieces from Mr. Bryson, I know what music will be involved and whether there'll be dance or whatever, and then I will simply live into that experience, trying to weave it together in such a way that it has a certain flow, a certain naturalness. After that, I'm helpless. Then we can execute it. Then we stand waiting, praying, hoping, longing for the experience which is beyond our control or ability to manipulate. That's how it is here, and in making that intentional choice, we have expressed an opinion that that is worship and (this is a value judgment that I'm going to say anyway), that is worship at its highest and its best.

It certainly is consistent with the biblical experiences of worship that we have, for example, Isaiah's experience. "It was in the year that King Hoshiah died." Was it a crisis for the nation? Was it a personal loss for Isaiah? Was it a grief that fell over, like on the day when Kennedy was assassinated? Was it a crisis of the nation as to whether or not Iraq will finally provoke us to war? Anyway, it was in the year that King Hoshiah died that Isaiah went into the temple and suddenly the foundations were shaking and the whole temple was filled with smoke, and seraphic beings were everywhere, crying out, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. Heaven and earth is filled with God's glory." Did you just get a goose bump? I did. And Isaiah felt his utter creatureliness, his lostness, his dependence, total dependence, and he heard a voice, and he said, "I'm unclean." The angel took a coal from off the altar and touched his lips and said, "You're cleansed." And, being cleansed and graced, he was called and commissioned. It was an experience of deep mystery. The prophet's life was changed in the encounter with the Holy, whatever that may be.

Or, the worship in heaven, before living creatures, the elders, bowls of incense, the prayers of people symbolized in the bowls of incense. The adoration of the Lamb that was slain. And again, that chorus of myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands of angels with a loud voice saying, "Worthy is the Lamb to receive honor and power and glory and wisdom and might, now and forever," and they fell down and they worshiped and they cried, "Amen, so let it be."

Now, it would be a travesty to try and define the pieces of that picture. It's a picture. It is a scene painted for us that we can feel, we can enter into, even if slightly, and we know some of it ourselves because we have felt our insides quiver. We, too, have now and again, here and there, we have known that out of ourselves and beyond ourselves we were in touch with something that was embracing us and holding us and gracing us, confronting us, lifting us. We speak of being wrapped in worship, our spirits inspired, uplifted into the Holy of Holies. Now and again, here and there, thank God, we do sometimes taste the eternal in the midst of our time, and if it is to happen, it will most likely happen where we come seeking it and where the very environment and the hour is so structured that it just might happen again.

In making that choice, we are making a deliberate, intentional choice, and we are swimming against the stream. You know that, don't you? And I don't want you to hear me this morning as being critical or condemning, because as I said early on, I'm expressing an opinion and there are all sorts of assemblies and all sorts of modes and moods of worship, and I do suppose that, just as I'm saying that which we try to create registers in the depths of our being, that there are those who find something registered in their being through an entirely different way. On the other hand, I want to say a word about the way we worship in contrast to that which is sweeping the landscape in our day. I would call it worship as entertainment. The organ is out; praise bands are in; choruses whose words generally lack any aesthetic value cast up on a screen to be repeated over and over again, which certainly does touch something and move something. It touches the emotion, somehow or other. Nothing against those things. I love an old-fashioned hymn sing or a Christmas carol sing. I love to gather around the piano when Mr. Bryson is playing and sing my lungs out before I lost my voice. But, now, I'm talking about that holy moment in the week, this moment, and I want to suggest to you that sacred space is so terribly important.

I had the opportunity last week, as many of you know, to preach in the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids and to walk into that grand cathedral is to have one's breath taken away. The magnificent stained glass windows, the vaulting architecture, the space itself lifts one's soul. You cannot help but be still, silent, tranquil, peaceful in that sacred space. And this far humbler space, yet beautiful, carefully appointed with form and fabric, in order to address that below or above your rational faculties, that intuitive sense you have to touch that aesthetic dimension of your life - I didn't know anything about that growing up. I didn't know how to worship; as I said, three hymns, two prayers and a long sermon and we were finally out of there. There was no sense of mystery or awe; there was no wrapping in the warm womb of fabric and smell and feel and touch. I didn't even understand it graduating from seminary. I suppose because, being in the Reformed tradition, we were still 500 years later reacting against the mystery of worship so magnificently captured still in the Roman Catholic church or the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox church, and the Jewish temple. I had to learn it all from scratch. But, having learned it, having come to experience it and

appreciate it, I am determined that it will prevail here over against that trend, that contemporary trend in which mega-churches are growing by leaps and bounds on such a diet.

I'm expressing an opinion and I'm an old fossil, and I don't have a very open mind on this question, and so you're probably stuck with the way it is as long as you're stuck with me. And I acknowledge that it's a deliberate, intentional choice, but I would say that it is that medium that has the greatest possibility of reaching into your inner being and leaving you speechless, full of wonder, lost in praise. My critical question to the contemporary trend, worship as entertainment, is: Can that medium bear the experience? Can the transcendent, the Awesome One find as a vehicle for encounter the chatty, casual, informal gathering of folks? That's a serious question. I raise it here, there, other places. I'm a minority voice. I have had many say to me, "Oh, yes, it can. The Transcendent, the Holy One can be mediated through any vehicle, any medium." I'm not so sure. There is a little song that I've heard a time or two. I do not know the words, I could not sing the tune, but I know the title, and the title is "Our God is Awesome." And, I mean, it really gets goin', it's "Our God is awesome, our God is awesome!" And I want to say, "Come on, sit down, quiet down, be silent. Stop! For, what you're singing about is denied by the manner and the mode in which you sing! There are times to sing and dance before the Lord. But, when I talk, when I think, when I open myself to the awesomeness of God, then I shouldn't be hopping around like a Jiminy Cricket. So, that's what you're stuck with.

So, how do you come? Open, open of mind, open of heart, senses tingling with anticipation. Obviously, then, prayerful, alert, aware of sights and sounds and the words and the music and the way the tapestry weaves together and flows and moves, and ready, then, to be moved along in a spirit of praise and adoration, engaging with the exposition, arguing with it, sorting it through, finding that upon which to contemplate, meditate, think, but all of it an honest opening of one's life to the Holy, to the possibility, here and now, even now the heavens might open and angels appear, in word and music, in sight and sound, in the smoke of incense - all of it, all of it the accouterments brought together in order to create the occasion in which it just might happen.

And, isn't it grand? Isn't it grand to be here in a place like this, a space like this, with people like this, a community, a human community, the Church, in worship, where the liturgy holds up the whole of life into the presence of God, where the newborn are baptized and those who died are given the final blessing, where young couples are united in marriage and young people are heard to stand and say, "I believe," and where we have vision clarified, where we are confronted honestly with ourselves and our flaws and failings, where we hear a word of grace, where our deepest concerns can be laid bare, where we can be embraced, where we can sing our hearts out, where our souls can be released to dancing, where we can have that fully, totally human experience of the Holy Other, full of grace. My God, I love it!