

Living With Wonder

From the sermon series: Lifelines

Text: Isaiah 6: 1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...I saw the Lord...high and exalted. Isaiah 6: 1

Viewing the Robert Kennedy story on television this past week I was reminded of the tumultuous events of the last quarter century. What drama and high tension have punctuated the flow of the years of recent decades. I remember vividly where I was the day John F. Kennedy was shot. Seeing familiar scenes flashed on the TV screen again this past week still sent a chill through me. The vast majority of our days flow without special significance and they are lost in the mists of the past.

But not all days, not all events. Some days, some moments change us forever; they leave their imprint upon us and we can never be the same again.

Isaiah knew that. He shared such an experience. Isaiah wrote,

*In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord seated on a throne,
high and exalted ...*

It was not necessarily the occasion of the King's death, although that is possible. Perhaps it was the annual enthronement festival. At least it was a great worship celebration, a state occasion in the setting of the Temple with, no doubt, the pageantry of priesthood, altar and incense. Whatever was the particular focus of the worship that day, for Isaiah, it was a moment of revelation, of the breaking through of the hidden majesty of God, the penetration of his whole being with the vision of the glory of God and he was transformed; his whole life was grasped, shaped and given its destiny.

In chaste and restrained fashion he describes the vision:

...the skirt of his robe filled the temple. About him were attendant seraphim ... calling to one another, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.'

As he was transfixed by the scene,

The threshold shook to its foundations, while the house was filled with smoke.

Such was the vision of the glory of God.

In reaction to the vision of God's holiness, the prophet was overwhelmed and sensed his unworthiness, his uncleanness in the presence of the Lord and he cried,

Woe is me! I am lost.

He knew immediately that there was a great gulf between the creature and the Creator. Such a vision would be his undoing, for he cries,

I have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.

But the gracious God revealed Himself not to destroy His servant; rather the ministering seraph took a glowing coal from off the altar and touched his lips, signifying his cleansing and the removal of his sins. Then it was that he heard the Lord saying,

"Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?"

To which Isaiah answered,

"Here am I; send me."

And the word of the Lord was, "Go and tell..." And Isaiah became one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, speaking the word of God to the People of God.

This passage is obviously about the making of a prophet, about the vision of God and the prophetic call. In this message, however, I want to use the passage for another purpose, which, although not its primary teaching, is yet certainly a valid use. Let us consider the experience recorded here as an instance of the encounter with God in the celebration of worship.

Worship is our focus. And even though Isaiah's experience was very personal, as all moments of divine revelation must be, yet its occasion was the corporate worship of God's people. It is corporate worship about which I invite you to think with me. Corporate worship is a lifeline; it provides the occasion in which Eternity breaks into our time, heaven touches earth, God reveals His glory, Grace and forgiveness are realized, the call of God is heard, and our response is offered.

Worship provides the setting in which we are lifted out of ourselves, beyond the limits of the ordinary, in which we have the experience of transcendence and we are enabled to live with wonder.

Living with wonder — That is the enrichment that worship affords. Moving from the experience of worship into the ordinary and the mundane to pick up our duties and exercise our vocations, all is transformed. A glow radiates over all of life. We move through the world as through a magnificent vaulted cathedral, conscious of the vertical dimension of life by which the horizontal plane of our lives has been intersected and transformed.

Archbishop William Temple wrote:

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; to devote the will to the purpose of God.

Those statements seem to flow directly from the experience Isaiah recorded for us.

Worship is a lifeline because it is the highest action of the human person whereby true humanity is realized through the vision, grace and call of God.

Worship is a spiritual discipline. It is means by which we are shaped into the persons God has called us to be. That shaping, that forming of persons, of a people, is accomplished most notably through the experience of corporate worship. In this message I recommend to you the great importance and value of regular corporate worship. I do so not to make it a legalistic requirement, the so-called "Sunday obligation." I do so because I believe the regular, corporate worship of the people of God gives structure and rhythm to life.

I recommend regular, corporate worship to you as a spiritual discipline, indeed, a lifeline, because I believe it is so vitally important to have a regular weekly appointment in which you can be unlocked from the world's grip, freed from the grip of value systems and ideologies that would mold you into a sub-human existence, lifted above the economic struggle for survival, the competitive struggle that creates tension with values of mercy and compassion, the perils of a consumer culture that pummels you with eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die – like a dog, a culture that would convince us that this is all there is.

No people can know spiritual formation, the shaping of life and value by the Word of God without a regular appointment with the occasion and the setting in which our lives may be encountered, confronted, judged, graced, healed and sent forth again to be the people of God in the world.

Living with wonder.

That could be a definition of being human. It speaks of living with the awareness of God, with the awareness that there is something more, a transcendent dimension; with a sense of grace that overcomes brokenness and failure; with a sense of vocation, calling, that gives life meaning and purpose.

A sense of wonder.

Living with wonder would enable others to sense through our language and behavior a life lived in openness and awesomeness before the world of things and peoples. As a friend and colleague described it,

In an over-rational and over-explained world our overweened arrogance of knowledge teaches us that wonder is a temporary state of curiosity caused by an ignorance of adequate explanation. To realize that this universe, the one in outer space as well as inner space, holds mystery beyond imagination. Dag Hammarskjöld was a celebrant of that mystery. He said in his diary, "God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason. (Howard Moody)

Isaiah's life was transformed in that moment of vision which occurred in the context of corporate worship. Every time we gather together here we place ourselves in the posture and setting where lightning may strike. Reflect with me about the act of corporate worship.

Obviously one could bring a whole series of messages on the subject of the corporate worship of God and I cannot begin to cover the subject in this one message. My focus is very limited and specific: *I am setting before you the great importance of a regular corporate worship as a spiritual discipline by which your life might be characterized by a sense of wonder.* In choosing this narrow focus I create for myself inevitable problems.

First, I can point to the vision of God which transforms human existence but I cannot guarantee that that will "happen" every time we gather for everyone, or even for anyone.

God reveals Himself. God gives Himself. God is sovereign in His own unveiling.

The same thing stated negatively - God cannot be manipulated by liturgical acts, incantations, sacramental actions. God is God. He is not at our disposal. He is not a genie to be "rubbed," moved by a magical formula or coerced into action by ritual of priest or people.

I face a second problem: To speak of the vision of God is not the same thing as experiencing the vision of God. To speak about worship is not worship. Speaking as I am now, tied to a biblical text over which we have prayed and to which we

give attention is an essential action of corporate worship. In speaking as I am, I speak out of prayerful preparation with confidence in the promise of God to speak through my words. Yet here, too, God remains God; God remains free.

In our Reformation tradition we have highly valued the sermon. We speak of the Word made flesh, the Word written and the Word preached and we call them all the Word of God. Nonetheless, apart from the present action of the Living God, the Word written remains a dead letter and the Word preached but human stammering.

In other words, in corporate worship all of the forms, liturgical acts, gestures, sacramental actions are human structures that provide the framework in which the "happening" may occur. To use an analogy, the structure of the service and the actions in which we engage are like the train tracks. Whether the locomotive moves down those tracks is not in our power to determine.

There is a third problem I face related to the one just mentioned: *I can only describe that to which I refer rationally; yet what I am seeking to describe is beyond reason.* Obviously as I speak to you I must attempt to be clear, to make sense. I work hard to make the message understandable. It must therefore be reasonable, able to be grasped by the reason. It must be logical so that its meaning can be grasped. But when I speak of the vision of God, of the inbreaking of God, of a "lightning strike" of revelation, I am speaking of an action of God, the experience of which is ineffable. The definition of "ineffable" is that which "cannot be expressed in words; unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible."

Do you sense my dilemma?

I am speaking about what is unspeakable, attempting to express what is inexpressible, trying to utter the unutterable. The best I can do is to point you by means of speech in logical thought, to a Reality which can only be experienced.

In a classic study of the experience of God, which is beyond reason's ability to grasp or describe, *The Idea of the Holy*, by Rudolf Otto, the author states:

This book, recognizing the profound import of the non-rational for metaphysics, makes a serious attempt to analyze all the more exactly *the feeling which remains where the concept fails*, and to introduce a terminology which is not any the more loose or indeterminate for having necessarily to make use of *symbols*. (Forward)

To speak thus of "feeling" certainly is not to reduce religious experience to a purely human phenomenon. The translator of Otto's book writes in the preface:

It is possible to devote our attention to religious "experience" in a sense which would almost leave out of account the object of which it is an experience. We may so concentrate upon the "feeling," that the objective

cause of it may fall altogether out of sight. Is religious experience essentially just a state of mind, a feeling, whether of oppression or of exaltation, a sense of "sin" or an assurance of "salvation;" or is it not rather our apprehension of "the divine," meaning by that term at least something independent of the mental and emotional state of the moment of experience? (p. XIII f.)

In reference to Otto's purpose, the translator affirms:

He is concerned to examine the nature of those elements in the religious experience which lie outside and beyond the scope of reason - which cannot be comprised in ethical or "rational" conceptions, but which none the less as "feelings" cannot be disregarded by an honest inquiry. And his argument shows in the first place that in all the forms which religious experience may assume and has assumed, so far as these can be re-interpreted ... certain basic "moments" of feeling ... are always found to recur.

Speaking directly to our point, he continues,

Here we are shown that the religious "feeling" properly involves a unique kind of apprehension, *sui generis*, not to be reduced to ordinary intellectual concepts, and yet - and this is the paradox of the matter - itself a genuine "knowing," the growing awareness of an object, deity. ... a response, so to speak, to the impact upon the human mind of the divine," as it reveals itself whether obscurely or clearly. The primary fact is the confrontation of the human mind with a Something, whose character is only gradually learned, but which is from the first felt as a transcendent present. "The beyond," even where it is also felt as "the within" man. (XIV F.)

When I speak of the problem of expressing what is essentially inexpressible, I am speaking of what Otto describes in his study. The translator states it thus:

The "feeling" element in religion involves, then, a genuine "knowing" or awareness, though, in contrast to that knowing which can express itself in concepts, it may be termed "non-rational." The feeling of the "uncanny," the thrill of awe or reverence, the sense of dependence, of impotence, or of nothingness, or again the feelings of religious rapture and exaltation, - all these are attempted designations of the mental states which attend the awareness of certain aspects of "the divine." (p. XV)

It is to the "feeling" that remains when the concept fails that I point you. I can only point to the experience. Isaiah described such an experience in the imagery of the Temple service. There in the midst of some festival celebration God broke through to him.

It was a life-transforming moment. For the rest of his days he was shaped by that vision. Few of us will ever have such a vivid, dramatic encounter. But it is the contention of this message that it is in the setting of corporate worship that we put ourselves in the way of such an experience. It is here in the sanctuary that we are most likely to be encountered and that we have the greatest potential for apprehending the divine vision. If we would live with wonder then we can do no better than place ourselves in the presence of God with spirits open to the lightning strike of His glory.

Rudolf Otto coins the word "numinous" to describe

... The specific non-rational religious apprehension and its object, at all its levels, from the first dim stirrings where religion can hardly yet be said to exist to the most exalted forms of spiritual experience. (p. XVII)

But he maintains that we cannot dispense with the knowledge that comes through human reason and moral experience. He insists, writes Harvey, that

for him the supremacy of Christianity over all other religions lies in the unique degree in which ... in Christianity the numinous elements, such as the sense of awe and reverence before the infinite mystery and infinite majesty, are yet combined and made one with the rational elements, assuring us that God is an all-righteous, all-provident, and all-loving Person, with whom a man may enter into the most intimate relationship. (p. XVII)

Thus it is Otto's contention that religion

... is a real knowledge of, and real personal communion with, a Being Whose nature is yet above knowledge and transcends personality. This apparent contradiction cannot be evaded by concentrating upon an aspect of it and ignoring the other, without doing a real injury to religion. It must be faced directly in the experience of worship, and there, and only there, it ceases to be a contradiction and becomes a harmony. (p. XVII)

God is the object of worship. We attempt to speak of God. The description of God is spoken of as the attributes of God and Otto writes,

... all these attributes constitute clear and definite *concepts*; they can be grasped by the intellect; they can be analyzed by thought; they even admit of definition. An object that can thus be thought conceptually may be termed *rational*. The nature of deity described in the attributes above mentioned is, then, a rational nature; and a religion which recognizes and maintains such a view of God is in so far a "rational" religion. Only on such terms is Belief possible in contrast to mere *feeling*. (p. 1)

However, too much religion, including our Reformed tradition, has stopped there. As Otto says,

... so far are these "rational" attributes from exhausting the idea of deity that they in fact imply a non-rational or supra-rational Subject of which they are predicates. ... That is to say, we have to predicate them of a subject which they qualify, but which in its deeper essence is not, nor indeed can be, comprehended in them; which rather requires comprehension of a quite different kind. (p. 2)

Otto points to the failing of Christian orthodoxy in that it

found in the construction of dogma and doctrine no way to do justice to the non-rational aspect of its subject. So far from keeping the non-rational element in religion alive in the heart of the religious experience, orthodox Christianity manifestly failed to recognize its value, and by this failure gave to the idea of God the one-sidedly intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation. (p. 3)

So much for the problems I encounter as I point you to the discipline of corporate worship as the place and occasion for an encounter with the living God from which one derives the sense of wonder that transforms all of life. Recognizing that I can point to the vision of God but cannot guarantee that to speak about worship is not the same as worshipping, and that I must describe the worship experience rationally, but that it is an experience beyond reason, let me nonetheless say something about the experience of corporate worship.

The first statement I would make is that *our worship is response to God*. He has taken the initiative; He has woven the truth of His being into the fabric of our being and no matter how much we deface His image in our souls, yet we can never fully divest ourselves of the trace of His imprint. This is where we part company with those following the German philosopher/theologian Feuerbach, such as Marx and Freud and company, who insist that religion is of human creation, prompted by human need and thus must be understood not as response to the revelation of God, but as a purely human action fashioning God out of human projections.

We speak of the "feeling" that remains when the concept fails; we speak of that which shatters our reason and breaks the bounds of our rational thinking, but we insist that is a reflex action a response, a re-action. God reveals Himself; our worship is response. Thus worship is something the People do Godward; it is human action offered to God Who is the object of our worship.

Therefore, while worship should be edifying and instructive, edification and instruction are not in themselves worship. Therefore, worship ought never to be boring, but neither is its purpose entertainment, simply holding the people's attention. Worship is the offering of praise and adoration to God Who has made

Himself known to us so that we cannot but respond by acknowledging His worship.

Secondly, *the corporate worship of God occurs in a carefully choreographed, dramatic pageant*. Such a statement will certainly not be accepted by all without objection. Let me quickly admit that there is a large variety of acceptable modes of worship. Where God's people gather, God's truth is declared and God's Spirit is present, there the worship of God occurs.

Let me acknowledge further that various modes and media of worship touch different persons. There must be no stereotyping of personality type that alone can worship truly, and worship depends not on one's theological understanding, liturgical training or aesthetic sense. Granting that I must insist that the worship of God demands of us the highest attention, the most strenuous care for detail, and the utilization of our best gifts all devoted to excellence of form and content in the experience of worship, I have acknowledged the legitimacy of variety in modes of worship: the silence of the plain Quaker Meeting House, the fervor of the Charismatic Pentecostals, the solemn dignity of Evensong in the setting of Cathedral magnificence.

Yet, let me put in a word for the mode of worship created in this place week by week. I spoke of a carefully choreographed, dramatic pageant.

The word pageant has several definitions. The most obvious is "a scene acted on a stage." Another definition is "a spectacle arranged for effect." And "pageantry" is defined as "splendid display; pomp." "Pomp" is defined as "splendid display or celebration; splendour, magnificence."

In the definitions of pageantry and pomp there is also another meaning of empty display or ostentation. That is interesting because it indicates what a fine line there is between truth and its counterfeit. That is why religious ritual and ceremony have so frequently through the centuries become empty, lifeless display without substance, without soul. Hollow forms have been the curse of the Church, foisted on her by ministers and priests without passion and faith, by religious leaders grown callous through familiarity with holy things.

Acknowledging all of that, I must still contend that the celebration of worship of the People of God at its highest and best is the full-spectrum pageant in which is utilized the arts which appeal to the aesthetic sense:

music that moves one in the depths;
movement that expresses what leaves the tongue dumb;
color and symbol creating a feast for the eye;
the word of truth that engages the mind and triggers the emotion that
triggers the will;
candles and crosses and colors of vestments;
incense and smoke rising heavenward;

the roar of the mighty organ;
the chill of an obligate;
the simplicity of a gesture - breaking bread, pouring wine,
making the sign of the cross on a forehead with baptismal water;
The word of assurance - "Your sins are forgiven; go in peace."
Choir and congregation in one mighty voice, singing to Father, Son,
and Holy Ghost, Alleluia!

Go back to the definition of pageant: "A spectacle arranged for effect." That is it, you see: arranged for effect.

What effect? The vision of God, surely! The vision of God, high and lifted up!

I cannot in calm rational discourse affect the vision; I can only point to it, speak about it, draw out the implications of it. Sweet reason does not remove the veil from the face of the living God. Reason reaches its limit; rational discourse comes to its bounding and still beyond reigns the living God. He must come to us. He must penetrate our space and time.

But if I can choreograph a pageant full of sound and sight which engages not only the head but the heart and soul, then at least I have set the stage - created the setting, arranged the spectacle where the effect might, if God be gracious, happen.

In such a setting I just may catch a glimpse of His glory; there may well be a moment in which there is a rift in the sky and in that moment my life may well be transformed, become radiant with light and full of glory.

Then I will have come to know God Who is beyond knowledge, and to possess a joy which is unspeakable. Then my life will be full of wonder, and I will walk beneath the blue sky of the heavens as though it were a great vaulted cathedral and my every day will be vibrant with praise.

Finally, in such an experience of worship all of life is lifted into the presence of God, cleansed and claimed and sent forth to serve. It is here in worship that one is most likely to hear the Voice, "Who will go for me?" "Whom shall I send?"

It is while one is lost in wonder, love and praise that one is most open to respond,

"Here am I, send me."

That, of course, is why this service always culminates in the offering. Where a People has caught a glimpse of the glory of God and heard the call of God, response is inevitable. Some action is called for, some gesture must be made. That is why the organ builds to mighty crescendo, the people rise, the gifts come forward and together we sing, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow."

How could we remain seated, passive, uninvolved? Such is the wonder of worship. From such worship flows life full of wonder. Living with wonder is living with heaven on earth.

Reference:

Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Oxford University Press, 1958.