

A HOLY TERROR

What Should I Bring to Worship (Part 3)

Text: Isaiah 6:1-13

I

Over these past few weeks we have been exploring together the meaning and practice of worship. We've tried to explain that before we can ever hope to *get* more out of worship, we may need to learn to *give* more to the process. In other words, before we'll ever be able to *take* more away, we've got to *bring* certain attitudes and awareness to our practice of worshipping God.

The first thing we need to bring is an awareness that worship was never meant to be a low-impact, spectator sport for us. On the contrary, it's meant to be a full-contact, utterly participatory adventure in which you and I are the performers and God alone is our audience. Until we're coming with that kind of attitude -- of giving to Him instead of getting for ourselves -- we may actually be wasting our time and insulting God. To put it poetically, we've got to approach our praying, our preaching, and our praising with a passion for the applause of heaven. We've got to long to seek and speak, to sing and serve, in such a way that God looks down and says: "Now, *there* is a people who long to commune with me in spirit and in truth. With such a people, I will meet and reveal myself."

Are we such a people? If so, then there's a second attitude it helps to bring to these worship services. We need to come with a reverent agnosticism towards God. What I mean by that is that it is good to come to this place humbly confessing that we have a lot more to learn about God. In fact, having been left for a week or so to our own devices, it is highly possible that we've reduced God to a more convenient and manageable size than He really is. For this reason, we need to come each week as if we're meeting God for the first time -- recognizing that it will take a lifetime -- and indeed an eternity -- to fully *know* Him.

II

Then, when you've come with a passion for the applause of heaven... when you've come with the genuine openness of a reverent agnosticism... be sure to bring with you to worship a holy terror as well. I know that may sound counter-cultural, weird, or even awful, but have you noticed how often the Scriptures call us to that? The writer of Proverbs not once but twice calls us to this sort of consciousness. **The fear of the Lord, he says, is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 1:7)**. So let me ask the obvious: Is your worship or mine characterized by any kind of holy fear?

Donald McCullough wonders about that. He says: "Visit a church on Sunday morning and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe... The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether the sermon will go over; the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing... The New Testament warns us to **Offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire' (Heb 12:28-29)**. *But reverence and awe have often been replaced by a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding a bit of religious atmosphere, perhaps, but no heat, no blinding light, no power for purification.*"¹

This phenomenon doesn't just disturb preachers, of course; it's clear that it bothers you in the seats as well. In a national study, pollster George Barna found that 58% of Americans surveyed feel that worship services rarely or never bring them into God's presence. Some will say it's because our music isn't inspiring enough, or that our preaching isn't practical enough, and there's probably some truth to that. But before either of those worship elements can be renewed, it seems to me that preachers and parishioners alike have got to recover or develop for the first time that healthy "fear of the Lord" -- that sense of "trembling awe" -- that the Scriptures say is the beginning of transformation. That's why I want to pose one pointed question to you this morning: WHY AND IN WHAT SENSE SHOULD WE *FEAR* GOD?

III

Let me suggest one answer. We should fear God, FIRST, because He is holy. Do you know what holiness is? It's not a concept that gets a lot of air-play these days, which is why it's probably helpful to go back to the roots of the idea. To the ancient Jews, holiness was a concept that had two dimensions: one "ontological" -- which is just a ten-dollar word for something having to do with "being"; and the other "ethical" -- having to do with "doing." I'd like to begin by thinking with you about the significance of just the first sense of holiness -- the part that has to do with God's *being*.

When the ancient Hebrews said that God was "holy," they meant that his very nature or being was "wholly other" than ours. They would have said "amen" to theologian, Karl Barth, who once observed that: "one cannot speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice." The Hebrews believed that to meet God was to encounter a Being whose very nature is utterly beyond our categories and constructs.

That's what Isaiah discovered for himself one day. Take a look at the text. We're told that it was **In the year that King Uzziah died... (Isa 6:1)** that Isaiah encountered God. Now we need to understand that, up to that point, King Uzziah was the most formidable being that Isaiah had ever known. He was like Abraham Lincoln, Billy Graham, and Maya Angelou all rolled into one. A brilliant statesman, fabulous moral

leader, and winsome public figure, Uzziah had held the reigns of Israel for an unprecedented 50 years. When he died, all of Israel, including Isaiah, had gone into bitter mourning. His departure seemed to leave a vacuum that no one else could fill. Isaiah likely thought that never again would there be such a sovereign.

That was until Isaiah met God. This is how the prophet describes what happened. He says, suddenly **I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted; and the train (or hem) of his robe filled the temple (Isa 6:1)**. The vision Isaiah has is of a Being so vast that it not only towers above humanity, but far above humanity's greatest structures -- symbolized here by the great temple of Jerusalem -- one of the wonders of the ancient world. The point here is that the magnificent edifice that the great Uzziah had restored wasn't big enough to hold even the cuffs of the trousers of God.

And, if Uzziah had once been attended by formidable soldiers, why the attendants around this Lord's throne made them look like anorexic pygmies. We're told that **above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying (Isa 6:2)**. Because most of us don't run into seraphim just every day, maybe it would help to translate the image here. The picture is of angelic warriors of unthinkable speed and strength; yet what is striking is that even these extraordinary beings are so blinded by the brilliant purity of the One they serve that they are forced to cover their eyes and moved to conceal the filth of their feet.

These seraphim are, themselves, beings of staggering power and glory. And yet Isaiah tells us that **they were calling to another** and saying: **"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3)**. We're told that **at the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds** of that massive, seemingly immovable Temple **shook, and the temple was filled with smoke (Isa 6:4)**. This is what happens when even the lowly servants of the Almighty God dare to speak of him. Imagine what it would be to hear directly from the King these seraphs worship!

Are you getting the picture? It's like something out of a science fiction film, only the aliens here *are* utterly and finally invincible. You're with Isaiah, walking down a dark, damp alley and suddenly find yourself in the face of a brilliant, fiery alien Presence so magnificent and vast that it absolutely fills your field of vision, and rocks your world, and fills your lungs with smoke. This alien is so large and so strange and so awesome that your joints lock up, and your muscles melt, and you can't help but fall to your knees, and then flat on your face in abject, speechless awe before It.

Do you understand that God is like this? He is "holy" -- as in "wholly other than" -- us. If we don't feel a certain terror in His presence... If, as author Annie Dillard says, we can come here in our velvet hats, when "we all should be wearing crash helmets" instead... If we can sit here casually, when we should all be begging the ushers to

"lash us to our pews" lest God should wake some day and take offense against our irreverence... If we can continue to just "blithely invoke" His name each week... then it must be because we are just not "sufficiently sensible of the conditions in which we worship."²

IV

Are you sensible of the conditions? If so then you will, perhaps appreciate that there's another dimension to the holiness of God -- the ethical dimension. You see, "holy" doesn't just mean "wholly other" in being; it also means "wholly pure" in doing. This God who is here right now is as perfectly pure in all of his ways as the light from the fiery sun that streams through those windows. Which is a SECOND reason to feel some fear of the Lord – because He is holy in all his ways and you and I are not.

You know that, don't you? If you can't or won't honestly confess your condition here, where will you? I once received a letter from a worship attender, requesting that we remove Prayers of Confession from our services. "I find them too negative and depressing," he said. I couldn't grant his request -- for selfish reasons, really. You see, I can't come into the light of an utterly holy God and not see myself for what I am. I can't be in such a fiery Presence and not see in bold relief the mixed motives, and the dark thoughts, and the vain habits that hide behind the window panes of my social manners. I've tried to think, like some New Age authorities tell me to think -- that I am really a divine being who just suffers from a self-image problem. But when I see the Lord, I know that I am wholly other than Him.

I need to confess that. It's one of the few truly pure-hearted things I do. Every week, I say with Isaiah here: **Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty! (Isa 6:5)** Along with Martin Luther, each of us is invited to say: *"Who am I that I should lift my eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround Him. At His nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God."* My friends, if you and I don't rightly fear the judgment of a holy God upon the sin in our life, then – I say it again – it must be because we are simply not sufficiently sensible of the conditions.

V

But, dear ones, it is precisely at this point -- when we've finally clued in to our condition versus God's condition -- that our fear of the Lord shows itself to be not the end of hope but the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7). You see, when you are struck with a true terror of the holy, you are finally humble and open enough to receive what the Holy One has wanted to do for you all along. Isaiah described how it happened to him like this: **Then one of the seraphs flew to me, with a live coal in his hand,**

which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said: 'See, [now that] this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for (Isa 6:6-7).

What is significant here is that the very fire before which Isaiah shrunk in terror is the same one out of which came the coal that burned away his sin. That which had been for him a symbol of destruction became for him the vessel by which he was saved. Does that sound familiar to you at all? Can you think of any other story in the Bible in which something that seemed a fearful harbinger of total judgment and destruction became for the humble an awesome symbol of grace and salvation?

I can. In my mind's eye I see a rugged cross atop a dark hillside long ago. I see an absolutely pure and brilliant being, mocked by a world gone mad, yet responding not with the righteous wrath such insane irreverence merits, but with words of forgiveness instead. I gaze up at the One who hangs there, expecting to see in his gaze a glare of condemnation for me, only to find there the eyes of love. My fear becomes less a dread that makes me want to run than an awesome wonder that makes me want to stay. And I fall on my knees at the foot of that cross, crying out: *Oh Lord, my God, how great thou art. How great thou art.*

Have you been to that cross yourself? Have you met the Holy One who hung there for you? Don't you think that meeting that kind of holiness ought to have an effect on us? The great missionary, David Brainerd, was convinced it would. Brainerd, who spent his life ministering among native American tribes, wrote these words in his journal: *"I never got away from the cross of Christ in my work with [my people.] When my people were gripped by [the vision of a holy God at once utterly punishing sin and at the same time utterly forgiving humanity], I had no need to give them instructions about morality... I find that my people begin to put on the garments of holiness and their common life begins to be sanctified even in small matters... [for] holiness follows as the sure and inevitable fruit of knowing a holy God."*

I pray you have met the holy God more fully today. And the evidence that you have will lie in this: When you hear the voice of that Lord calling you to a life of holy service in days to come... When you sense him calling you to pursue his way rather than the world's way -- to forgive where it would be natural to condemn; to give where others might hoard; to speak up and step out where others remain shamefully silent and stuck... When the voice of the Spirit of God comes to you this week saying, **Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? (Isa 6:8)** – if you know something of the Holy God, then You will say with Isaiah, "I may not be worthy on my own merits, Lord, but if One such as you calls me to action, then **Here am I; send me!" (Isa 6:8)** May that be so. Amen.

¹Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*, p.13

²Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p.40.