

Isaiah 6 is one of the most profound chapters in the Bible. Isaiah was worshipping in the temple, lost in the pagantry of the ancient ritual. There, in the midst of other worshippers, he suddenly felt alone before God; he was surrounded by the majesty of the holy God. This meeting in the temple shook the very foundations of Isaiah's life.

Thru the centuries, Christian worship has followed a similar motif of God's call and man's response. As Christians, we feel our worship is more complete than Isaiah's for we have seen God in Christ. Still, Isaiah's experience has deeply influenced Christian worship. We will note some of the ways.

1. God reveals himself as a holy God. Isaiah came to the temple to worship a known God, not an unknown one...a God who had a covenant with his people and who was actively engaged in their collective struggles. Isaiah came to worship because he felt that that God had a claim upon his life. He came in response to God's invitation.

In the temple experience Isaiah is awe-struck by God's holiness: In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said "Holy, Holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory". And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke" (6:1-4)

This passage emphasises the holiness of God - the God

who is different from man so that man cannot fully understand him, foresee his action, or control him. The Lord is king, he is sitting on a throne. He has attendants, but no earthly king ever had such attendants. In Hebrew thought the seraphim were supernatural beings, high above man. Yet they were mere servants of God, covering their unworthy eyes so as not to look at God's glory.

Now we do not describe our experience with God in such highly poetic fashion, and few have the ecstatic insight of Isaiah. But haven't we all had some kind of experience which has brought us closer to the heart of the ternal. Perhaps it has been in this church, or some great cathedral, or somewhere else. It is our hope that a bit of that awe may be experienced in each of our worship services. Perhaps we need to often seek to get in contact with some of our awesome experiences. Perhaps we ought, in our service, do more to try to help you have a sense of the holiness of God.

2. Isaiah's immediate response to this experience of the holiness of God was to recognize his own unworthiness:

Woe is me. For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts (6:50)

In-sert illustration from "Logan's Run"?

Most of us are aware that we have to deal with several "selves". We are not always the same. There is a part of us that seeks good, and there is a part which seems to desire

Ill. from "Logan's Run"

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In an episode from "Logan's Run", a futuristic society is pictured. In order to live in the society, people had to undergo "processing". They would stand beneath a ray of light, and they would be split into two persons. One of the persons was the good part, the other was the bad part. The utopian society was then maintained by exiling the bad people outside a force field. They were known as outcasts, while those who stayed inside the city were known as the "processed". The episode climaxed when the outcasts gained entrance to the city and convinced the leader of the processed to reintegrate the bad selves into the personality.

evil. And I suppose it is impossible to do away with all ⁽⁴⁾ ~~(8)~~ the evil cravings we have in our personalities. Sometimes, by inference at least, we seem to think that all the good people (the processed) are in the church, while all the bad people are outside. But we know that this is not true. Down deep we recognize that all of us are unworthy of the holy God, that we need to confess our sin.

When we acknowledge the holiness of God, we are aware of the distance between us and God: God is God - pure, holy, complete. Man is man - unholy, impure, incomplete. We will understand that we are rebellious and disobedient, not worthy to stand in God's presence. And the words will come as a groaning in our souls: "I am a man of unclean lips." But confessing our personal sins is not enough, we need to recognize our corporate sinfulness: "I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips.

It is the recognition of our unworthiness which is the gate to true worship. Unless we become sharply aware of our sinfulness, we are not worshipping the holy God, but a god of our own making, a god with whom we can be cozy and comfortable. This awareness may come in a number of ways. In our service we have a time for oral and corporate confession. However, the awareness of our sinfulness may come thru the scripture, the hymns, the anthems. However it comes, it is essential to real worship, a necessary part of true worship. We are

sinner who need God's grace. God can do something with us when we recognize our need for forgiveness. But he cannot help us when we stand in his presence believing that we have clean hands and heart. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of repentance and forgiveness, means nothing to those who arrogantly refuse to acknowledge their sinfulness before the Holy God.

After Isaiah confessed his sin to God, the prophet described a dramatic occurrence:

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven". (6:6)

3. The Christian community at worship also finds God's forgiveness. The assurance of forgiveness should not surprise us. Forgiveness by God is not a mechanical response to our confession. The nature of God is a forgiving love, which seeks out the prodigal in the far country. As people of faith we believe that God has accepted us as his children even before we acknowledge our guilt. Worship enables us to be reminded - for we sadly forget - of God's forgiveness.

4. Isaiah was awed in the presence of the holy God. He acknowledged his guilt, and received the assurance of God's forgiveness. What next? Isaiah wrote:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?". (6:8)

God's question seemed to be addressed to him personally. Isaiah felt a claim laid upon his life. (6)

Such is our experience of Christian worship. We receive the gift of a restored relationship to God. God claims us for himself.

But what is God going to do with us. Does he want us to spend our days in mystical contemplation of him? Well, as with Isaiah he has something he wants us to do.

For you see, worship is not a retreat from life, it is confronting life in a new way. It is here that we ought to become more aware of the needs of the world which cry to be met. Here God climas and calls us: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

5. Isaiah described the climax of his temple experience in a single short sentence: Then I said, "Here am I. Send me". (6:8). What a magnificent response. There was no hesitation, no counting the cost, no debate, no haggling, no deals, only a simple dedication and commitment of life. Isaia didn't know the job description. He hadn't even asked about retirement benefits. Still, he was willing to place his future in the hands of the holy God.

Offering is the climax of worship. I don't mean only the offering of money, though that may be the visible symbol of the commitment of life. I mean the offering of what our mon-

represents - ourselves, our interests, our common days, our hopes, our pasts, our presents, our futures. The words from the communion liturgy puts it like this: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies"

Life is all about setting priorities. And worship in spirit and truth teaches us that there is no greater priority than God. God alone deserves the gift of our total selves.

We all raise the question: "Who or what is God?" And that is a difficult question to answer. We will never answer it intellectually. Rather we discover the answer to the question when we are willing to be sent by God. It is in obedience that we find who God is.

I believe that God is here today. As he encountered Isaiah centuries ago, he comes to us. He raises the same question with us. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" If we can respond with "Here am I, Send me" our whole lives will be changed.