

Our worship of God is a gift of great joy!

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, October 13, 2016

Evensong, selected readings: Psalm 84, Isaiah 6:1-8, Ephesians 2:13-22

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV): *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. 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. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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." 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!"*

Tonight's readings were selected around a theme of the worship of God. In the vision statement of our parish, the Worship of God is primary—worshipping God comes first. Worship is the basis for who we are and what we do and how we respond to the world. Before we develop as disciples, we identify our master through worshipping him. Before we serve Christ in the world, we worship him.

Our readings give us different pictures of what worshipping God means and what that worship does in us. On the one hand, worshipping God is like our other forms of worship. We wouldn't miss seeing our favorite football team play (and we dress-up for the occasion and go through a set ritual). We wouldn't miss our favorite TV show, and we follow our favorite topics or people in the news. So it is with the worship of God. We passionately devote ourselves to God's glory.

We are drawn to God for many reasons—from affection, from devotion, and from the sheer awe of the presence of God. The prophet Isaiah paints one of the more vivid pictures of the worship of God from his vision of the throne room of God in heaven. The throne of God is in the temple, high and lifted up and shrouded in smoke. Isaiah's words can only attempt to describe God's greatness. The presence of God is so great and so beyond us that even just the hem of his robe fills the whole temple—not all his robe, just the hem of his robe. If that is how great the mere hem of his robe is, can you imagine how much greater God himself must be?

Heavenly creatures attend to Almighty God, flying around the throne and calling to one another "Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord God of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!" It is an earthshaking experience for Isaiah, and he is humble in the presence of God—humbled and yet still called by God to his service. Isaiah describes God's greatness and majesty—the Glory of the Lord—like a tangible, heavy mass of awe-inspiring greatness! The scene is magnificent and breathtaking!<sup>1</sup> This is the worship of God in heaven that we try to imitate here on earth.

You will notice that this is where we get our "Sanctus" that we sing in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, when we lift our hearts up to the Lord, we are lifting ourselves into the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Like the impact of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, played as a prelude to Evensong that night.

God in heaven—into the very throne room of God, where we respond like the seraphim “Holy, holy, holy!” Our Communion service—the Holy Eucharist—is the central feast of the church. We celebrate the feast of our Lord every Sunday with the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, our worship on earth is an attempt to approximate the worship of God in heaven as we praise God with the same joy and fervor.

When we gather together to worship God, we also unwrap gifts that God gives us. As we worship God, we receive gifts of joy, gifts of each other, and most of all, the gift of God’s presence in our lives.

Today’s psalm, Psalm 84, describes this joy—the joy of the presence of God in his temple.

*How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts!  
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord  
My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.*

*Happy are they who dwell in your house  
They will always be praising you*

The psalmist describes the passion and delight that we feel in the temple of the Lord—the place where we experience most palpably the presence of God. Our worship of God is a gift of great Joy that God gives to us.

The Eucharist is our weekly feast, but what about during the week? The Book of Common prayer took to heart the need for regular prayer and worship in our lives. But most people can’t take the time that monks take to worship and pray eight times a day. So, Thomas Cranmer, the father of the first English Book of Common Prayer, provided primarily two services: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. These two services provided regular prayers and readings of psalms and Bible readings each day. Evensong became the sung version of Evening Prayer, usually provided in Cathedrals where the tradition of chant and song was sustained.

These Daily prayer services were intended to be regular nourishment for our souls, connecting us the worship of God each day. The Eucharist and Evensong are there to teach us how to pray, to keep us connected to Holy Scripture, to remind us of God’s presence and the joy we feel with him. Our worship of God in this place reminds us who we are: disciples of Jesus Christ together. For our worship of God is a gift of great joy.

In tonight’s reading from Ephesians, Paul writes that Jesus reconciled us together that we might be one body through the cross. Paul compares us to that temple that the psalmist delighted in, the temple that was a reflection of the throne room of God, the place where God is present. Paul writes that in Christ we are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

When we gather together in Christ, knit together as one body through the cross, we become a living temple of the Lord. We experience the presence of God, we stand in awe of the Almighty, and we praise God for his many blessings. Our worship of God is a gift of great joy!

As you head into your week at home and at work or at school, carry with you the gift of God's presence that you encounter here in worshipping him. Remember the awe, the comfort, and especially the gift of great joy. Our worship of God is a gift of great joy!