

“For God’s Sake”

August 7, 2016

Starting Over, Digging Deeper series

Our summer series is based on a book whose theme is the premise “it’s not what you think.” Jefferson Bethke is a young adult (younger than I am!) who invites us to consider what we think we know about living our Christian faith and dig more deeply. Back in June, we started over together with the story of God creating - remembering that God created all of us in God’s image and called us and all of creation “good.” We continued on looking at aspects of our faith, and today it’s about worship.

I’ll warn you - some people didn’t like today’s sermon title. But let me be clear. I used the title “For God’s Sake” because we’re talking about why we worship. You and I might be very comfortable with our views of worship, but maybe worship is not what we think it is. We’ve made “going to church” synonymous with “worship,” but it’s more than that.

Worship is about putting God first in our lives and centering our lives around God. “True worship is about the priority we place on *who* God is in our lives and *where* God is on our list of priorities.” So we turn to the prophet Isaiah.

Can you picture this encounter that Isaiah has? It is vivid! This is one of those “thin places” where heaven and earth meet. And it’s especially powerful to consider what’s going on in Isaiah’s world. It was the year King Uzziah died, and some scholars say it was a time of leadership transition from one king to another.

Folks were anxious about the future, and Isaiah would be the one to call them to account because of how they had rebelled against God: cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. God calls Isaiah as prophet to walk with God’s people through exile and offer the promises of restoration and hope for the future.

Most scholars also believe that Isaiah came from the priestly class, and so it wasn’t uncommon for him to be in the Temple. But this day was different. Isaiah has a vision of the Lord with his robe filling the temple and heavenly beings singing. I wonder if he was expecting anything that day. Perhaps he went into the Temple as usual, but it wasn’t usual.

How many of us came to church today? How many of us came to worship? Did you and I wake up and say, “I just know that something powerful will happen in worship today. I can’t wait for what God is going to do!”?

If we’re honest, we might have been distracted by other stuff - trying to get here on time, an argument with a family member, wanting to go back to bed, or thinking

about all we have to do later today. It's so easy for us to forget that God desires our full attention, and God is speaking.

We experience the presence and power of God and God's grace as a disruption or an interruption as we're going about the everyday. Our plans are changed, and in the midst of it, God shows up (but has been there all the time). God is revealed to us in a brand-new way.

Isaiah's call challenges us to think about what happens in worship. Why are we here? Maybe it's habit for some of us. Maybe it's something to do. One of our bishops said that too many of us come to church because we want God to do something for us. But, he said, worship is something we do for God. God is our audience when we worship. We're not an audience for what happens up here. This isn't a performance; this is time to praise and pray and connect with God.

It's time to put God in first place above the other stuff - money, power, stuff, relationships - and remember that we're called to reflect God's image to the world. Even so, we struggle with worshiping God rather than idols - whatever it is in our lives that promises to fulfill what only God can, Bethke says. We worship things other than God, and we get off track. Worship gets us back on track and connected to God.

That's what happened to Isaiah that day in the Temple. He connected with God. We don't worship simply to get something for ourselves, but to praise God who is holy, awesome, worthy. We connect to the One who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Someone said, "We don't come to worship just to have our so-called "felt needs" met, but also to *find out* just what our needs really are! We don't come to chum around with the God we want, but to encounter the true God in ways that make us into the kind of people *God wants!*" That's a powerful word – to think that worship changes us!

Worship isn't just Sunday morning. Worship is a way of life - of always trying to keep God at the center. However, there's something about intentional time with God and with each other that helps us keep God at the center. Isaiah connects with God in worship - in the holy place. And when he encounters God, he looks at himself differently. He confesses his sin in light of God's glory. When Isaiah experiences this incredible vision of the Lord, after he stands in awe of God, his first reaction is confession. He opens his heart to God who sees him and knows him. He doesn't gloss over his sin or make excuses for it. He speaks it clearly and boldly.

We're led to radical honesty about who we are. We are God's beloved, but we are sinners who need God desperately. Just like Isaiah, we are a people of unclean lips in a world where there is struggle and strife, where evil seems to prevail, and we have to confess our sin so that we recognize that God is bigger than us, that God is HOLY, that God is at work to overcome evil with good, hate with love, and despair with hope.

When we confess our sin to God, we are drawn into deeper trust and love for God's power to forgive, reconcile, and make us new.

After his confession, Isaiah is cleansed and forgiven. God removes the barrier. God doesn't shun or condemn Isaiah, but frees him of his guilt. That was a barrier between himself and the Lord. He couldn't be in God's presence – or didn't think he could be - but God sets him free and calls him to serve.

When Isaiah is forgiven and freed, he can respond to God's question, "Is there anyone I can send? Who will go for us?" He listens to God. He answers the call and is sent to be a prophet of God to the people. In the Hebrew, Isaiah's response is literally, "Ready!"

It's been said that God isn't so much concerned with our ability, but is more concerned with our availability. Are we available to God? Are we ready to be used by God?

Some of us are struggling with God's call on our lives - what am I supposed to do to follow God's will? Some of us are feeling prompted, nudged, and pushed by God to serve in a special way. Friends, we might not have Isaiah's blinding vision of God on the throne, but God is seeking all of us and celebrating when we seek him.

So today as we come receive the bread and cup, we stand in awe and wonder of who God is – almighty, holy, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, the One who saves us by grace through faith.

And we confess our sin, so that we're prepared to encounter God in all of God's glory. You might notice that confession is always followed by assurance of God's forgiveness. God doesn't call us to be burdened by sin and guilt, but to accept God's grace for ourselves and allow it to set us free.

True worship doesn't just end with a powerful moment. I heard a sermon from a colleague who said that for Isaiah and for us, worship leads to obedience - to following God with everything - not holding back, but responding to the One who gave himself for us. For us, it's serving even when it's not convenient, taking steps to share our faith with others in a way where God's grace is lifted high, forgiving others as a witness to our faith, allowing God's wisdom to guide our giving, and anything else that puts God first.

"Is there anyone I can send? Who will go for us?" Friends, I pray for myself and for you that our hands would go up and our hearts would burst with joy and our voices will say, "Ready!"

For God's sake, for the sake of the world, may we worship God fully.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.