

# WHAT DO WE DO UNDER THAT BIG ROOF?

Isaiah 6:1-9; John 4:19-24

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Several years ago I had the opportunity to talk with a group of boys and girls in one of my former churches who came in to look at our church sanctuary. One of the youngsters in the group looked up and asked; “Hey, Mr. Pastor, what goes on under this big roof?”

Well, what does go on under this big roof? This big roof was designed as a place where we could worship God. Archaeologists who have examined the ruins of various civilizations state that they have discovered three basic things: an altar, a prison, and a cemetery. The altar indicates that men and women worshiped. A prison indicates that people have sinned. A cemetery denotes that men and women die. In the ruins of every civilization, worship has been a key factor.

You may have heard about the young girl who came to her mother and asked: “Mother, you know the vase that you told us had been passed on down through the generations in the family?” “Yes,” the mother said, “I know about that, daughter. That is one of my most prized possessions.” “Well, I hate to tell you,” the daughter continues, “but this generation has dropped it.” There are a lot of people in this generation who have dropped worship. They have not made it a vital part of their lives and that is a tragedy.

## **Isaiah’s Vision of Worship**

For guidance in our worship, let us turn to the sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah. Here are some significant characteristics of worship. In the year that King Uzziah died, which was approximately 736 B.C., Isaiah went to the temple to worship. This was a time of great sorrow for Isaiah, because Uzziah had been a very beloved king. Uzziah was only sixteen years old when he began his reign and was on the throne for about fifty years. He had been a good king and it was a prosperous time for Israel. His death ushered in a crisis for the nation. Isaiah’s reaction to Uzziah’s death may have been similar to the feelings many persons experienced when president Franklin Delano Roosevelt died in 1945. He had served as president from 1933 until his death in 1945. He was the only president many had ever known

and was greatly beloved by many. For another generation, the death of President John F. Kennedy produced great trauma, as they wondered how fragile our government might be.

### **The Call to Adoration**

In his time of sorrow Isaiah went to the temple to worship. In that worship experience Isaiah had a vision which changed his life. His vision of God contained three basic elements. The first was a vision of God and the call to adoration. “I saw the Lord high and lifted up.” The whole foundation of the temple began to shake. Although the king was dead, Isaiah was assured that the eternal God was not dead. We need that same assurance.

Isaiah experienced the majesty of God which was so overwhelming to him that the train of God’s robe, his presence, filled the whole temple. The folds of God’s royal robe filled the whole temple and six seraphim—“the burning ones,” in Hebrew—surrounded God whose majesty was indescribable and whose being was clothed in unapproachable mystery and wonder. These seraphim, creatures of “flame and light,” stood over or above the Lord, who was seated on his throne, to render continuous worship and service.

### **The Holiness of God**

Isaiah experienced the holiness of God. In his vision, Isaiah heard the seraphim as they sang to God: “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The seraphim had six wings. With two of the wings, they covered their eyes; with two, they covered their feet, and with two, they flew. They covered their eyes and face out of their sense of reverence for God. They covered their feet, or really better translated their genital organs, to hide their nakedness before God because of their humility. With the other two wings they flew, which indicated their way of serving God. Through his vision of the angels of God, Isaiah depicted concepts of reverence, humility, and service.

As he saw God high and lifted up, Isaiah heard the angel sing: “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The word holy means that God is separate. God is the one above us. Our sins separate us from him. We are the ones who have come to worship him. We seek to restore our broken relationship. The effect of the presence of God in the temple caused the threshold or foundation of the whole building to shake. When God’s spirit permeates our being; our whole life should feel the shaking effect of his presence. A vision of God does not leave our life the same again.

For Isaiah this experience of the holiness of God was so intense that it forever shaped his ministry. God was to him forever grand and wondrous beyond compare. He constantly denounced the pride of the people. He called them to fall down before

the holiness of God and not cling to their sinful pride (Is. 2:12-22 for example).

When Moses stood before the burning bush, God said to him, "Take off your shoes, because the ground on which you stand is holy ground." I wonder what we would do today if we had such an experience. Well, we would probably want a camera or a video camera to take a picture of the burning bush. Rather than taking off our shoes in worship, we might want to sell popcorn or candy to entertain people. Rather than taking off our shoes, we would probably want to prop our feet up someplace and discuss why we think the burning bush is not consumed. What am I saying? Many today have lost the sense of the holiness of God. I know in my own experience that my awareness of the holiness of God permeates my whole concept of what worship is. We bow before God, who is wholly and holy other than we. We always seek to bring God our very best in worship and bow in humility before God.

### **A Lack of Preparation**

Sometimes we have difficulty in worshipping God because we make no preparation for our worship. We come in the church door, sit in our pew and continue chatting even after the organist begins to play. We talk about all sorts of things in the world without directing our thoughts toward God at all. The Jewish people began their worship on the night before the Sabbath. They paused to get ready for worship. Maybe we, too, need to learn better how to make preparation for it. I have a friend who said that the moment he put his hand on the door at church, he began to focus his mind in a deliberate way on how he might worship God.

### **Spectators in Worship**

One of our biggest problems with worship today, however, is that many want only to be spectators in their worship. People are content to be an audience instead of worshipers. It is very difficult really to worship when we are merely an audience. Religious television has really hurt us here. They have made us into onlookers and spectators in religion. There is an interesting book; written by Quinton Schultze entitled *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion*. He underscores the damage of televangelism in these words:

The result of televangelists' capitulation to the popular culture and to the intrinsic demands of the medium is the substitution of the new message for the old evangel. This message focuses primarily on the personality and authority of the evangelist; substitutes entertainment for nurture and sorcery for evangelism; transforms believers into an audience; tells viewers

what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear; turns the gospel into a product and evangelism into marketing; equates spiritual faithfulness with financial support; and sets ministry against ministry in competition for audience share.<sup>1</sup>

The religious shows of televangelists are one of the heresies of our age, and we need to fight this heresy with every ounce of our strength. They have made worship personality centered—and by that I mean the personality of the preacher instead of God-centered. Whenever the attention of worship focuses on the preacher, the musicians, organists or some other person instead of God, the direction is all wrong. All the persons in the service should point clearly to God and not seek to draw attention to themselves. We need to remember that worship is not primarily what you and I get out of it. But it is what we bring to God. God is not so much seeking to satisfy your need or my need, as we are seeking to satisfy God. Worship is not something that God does for us. Worship is what we do for God. That is a key which many of us have lost. Isaiah saw God high and lifted up. He experienced the sovereignty of God. God's throne was above all else. The sovereign Ruler of the world was still reigning.

### **Worship Challenges Us to Look at Ourselves**

Secondly, Isaiah had a vision about himself. He came to worship in a time of great national sorrow. He may have had doubts and suffered from depression. We don't know. How many times do we say, "I can't worship if I am not in the mood for it." We may be depressed, lonely, sad, be low or be affected by our moods, but remember worship is not controlled by our mood. God broke through Isaiah's grieving mood and gave him a vision of his presence. In his experience of worship, Isaiah discovered his own sinfulness. "Woe is me. I am unclean," he cried. The holiness of God helped him see that he was sinful.

### **Awareness of Our Sins**

Today many people do not want to hear about their sins. They want to come to church and be happy and feel good. They do not want somebody to make them aware that they are sinners. The positive thinking and possibility thinking philosophy of some television evangelists make us think we are OK. These television preachers seldom speak about sin or the cross. But this passage reminds us that when we meet the Holy God, we are confronted as sinners and in need of redemption.

In one of Charles Schultz's cartoons, Lucy walks over to Snoopy and places a

balloon in his mouth and says: "I am going in for lunch, Snoopy...Hold this for me..." "Whatever you do," she says, "Don't let go of it." In a few moments, he falls asleep. Several frames show Snoopy sleeping and, then, all of a sudden he gives a big yawn. As he opens his mouth and yawns, the balloon floats off into the air. In the last caption you see him with a little sack on a stick, looking like a hobo, and walking down the railroad track saying: "Make one mistake and you pay for it the rest of your life." But the Christian gospel does not leave us trapped in our past mistakes. God offers us forgiveness and opportunity to begin anew.

### **The Power of Forgiveness**

One of the beautiful symbols in this passage is the purging of Isaiah's sinfulness with a coal taken from the altar of God. His lips are purged by the touch of that coal upon them. This symbol reminds us that forgiveness is not easy or painless. The forgiveness of sins is not without pain. To confess to someone that you have hurt them, wronged them, betrayed them, or let them down is painful. The forgiveness of God sometimes brings us suffering and hurt. God's spirit will bring us forgiveness and purges us from our sins and makes us whole but this experience may be painful.

It is also interesting to me that Isaiah cried out "I have unclean lips" rather than an unclean heart. But isn't it often true that our lips reveal what is in our heart? And since Isaiah was to be a spokesman, for God he had to have his lips purged so that he could declare the authentic truth of God. When our lips are purged, it symbolizes that our inner life has also been purged and changed.

Some people try to focus on a tangent of worship instead of its central thrust. This kind of selective focus is seen in the conversation which Jesus had with the Samaritan woman by the city's well. She began by trying to go off on a tangent. She noted that the Samaritans worshiped God over on one mountaintop and the Jews worshiped on another mountain. "Where are we really supposed to worship anyway?" she asked. The Samaritans had been very selective in their view of the Scriptures. They believed that the only part of the Scripture which was authentic was the Pentateuch, the first five books in the Old Testament. They rejected the Prophets, and the wisdom literature. They were very selective in what they believed was the word of God. This, of course, led to a very selective approach to worship as well.

### **We Can Encounter God Anywhere**

Notice what Jesus told the Samaritan woman about worship. "You shall worship God in spirit and truth." Place is not an end in itself. Hopefully, we shall not

permit the beautiful symbols in this place, or any place of worship, to become an end in themselves. All of our worship symbols point us to God. They should never get in the way of our communing with God. Architecturally and symbolically our sanctuary seeks to point us to sense God, who is high and lifted up and to worship him within the very depths of our being. We gather that we might have a vision of God. We come with our mind, our heart, and our spirit open to the power of his presence.

There are many people today who want to pick and choose how God addresses them. Some believe that unless God comes down a particular mental street, one cannot encounter God. They will not be open to God except in a certain place. There are some who have so preprescribed God's domain of worship that unless God walks back down the aisle of their little country church, they cannot worship. Unless God communicates to them through a Fifth Avenue Sanctuary, they cannot hear God's voice. Unless they have a certain choir, or a particular kind of music, or a particular form of worship, or a particular preaching style, God can't communicate with them. This attitude tries to limit God's presence to the known and familiar. That is unfortunate because God's spirit, like the wind, blows where it will. I confess that I understand this attitude. I often face that same kind of struggle and I am very uncomfortable in some kind of worship settings.

Jesus reminded the woman at the well that God is spirit, and he can communicate with us in many places, means and ways. As we gather to worship, God may come to meet us in familiar places or in new "wineskins" that we cannot anticipate or might expect. We must open our lives to encounter God in spirit and truth and acknowledge that we cannot pigeonhole God in any of our narrow places, creeds, dogma or traditions. God often breathes through these old forms, but the breath of God's presence may open new doors and windows in our perception of God's presence.

### **A Call to Service**

Finally, worship gives us, as it did Isaiah, a vision of responsibility and service. After Isaiah had experienced the holiness of God, where he had seen God high and lifted up, and then experienced the forgiveness of God's grace when he realized his own sense of inadequacy, then he heard God ask, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?" Isaiah responded; "Here am I. Send me."

When we gather to worship, our central affirmation is that it is not so much we who are seeking God as God is always seeking us. God is the eternal pursuer who continues to trail us down through the ages of time to come into your life and

my life and bring us his love and grace. God pursues us. He comes to us and draws us to himself. Having experienced God in our lives, we then should be different because of that encounter. Worship should make a difference in our lives. If we leave church Sunday after Sunday and there is no real difference in our lives, have we really worshiped God? When we meet the living God of the universe in worship, we should go out and live, think, and act differently because of that meeting.

### **Remain Open to God**

When the God of the universe came into Isaiah's life, he heard God's voice: "Who will go?" And he responded: "Here am I, send me," Out of our meeting with God in worship, we exclaim: "I will go, Lord, and I will live for you in all of my life." We should not be the same. When God has come into our life, we should be radically different. Worship calls us to a high hill, a holy place, in which we sense God high and lifted up. The vision from that elevation enables us to see life in a new perspective. From the hilltop with God, we should go back down into the valleys of life and be strengthened to face the problems and difficulties more effectively. Our relationship with the eternal God of the universe fortifies us to refocus our whole purpose about living. Our perspective changes from getting to giving, serving instead of getting.

If you and I have a real genuine experience with God, we cannot be spectators. We cannot be content with being an audience. God demands participation. When we participate in worship, we are drawn into a relationship where we sense our own sins; we experience forgiveness, and having experienced forgiveness, then God challenges us to rise up to serve him. We can't be spectators. We are called to ministry.

There is a Methodist church in Chicago which claims to be the tallest Methodist church in the world. Above the church building is a tall skyscraper office building and above the office building is a tall slender steeple. The church decided that they ought to do something a bit more religious to bear witness to their community, so they decided to install some bells in their steeple. Then around the clock and on the hour, the crowds on the streets below might hear them and want to come to worship. The bells were installed. But then when they rang the bells in the high steeple, noise of the traffic, the busy, rushing people and the far distance of the bells above the people made them inaudible. They rang the bells, but nobody could hear them. The distance was too great and the people were too busy.

Sometimes our busyness, anxiety, involvement in everything else—our distance from God—keeps us from hearing God's voice calling to us. The most

important thing we do as church is worship. Everything else we do stems from that experience. If we really do not worship God, then we will not serve God.

### **Worship Is Essential**

If we have really met God in worship—had a “vision” of God—then we will want to come again and again to this place of worship. We cannot do without worship. This is the place we experience God’s forgiveness, love, grace, peace and guidance. When we allow every thing else to push worship aside, then we are acknowledging that to us it is not essential.

Yet, worship is as essential to real living as food to survival, water to quench our thirst, air for breathing, light for seeing and sound for hearing. Worship is the most important act we do to nourish our spiritual life. To fail in worship is to cut one’s self off from God.

Isaiah encountered God in a special way that forever changed his life. I pray that each of us will have a similar experience. Our faithfulness in worship will reflect our commitment. Let us gather to reverence and adore God, make our confession of sin, experience God’s forgiving grace, and accept our commission to serve God in our daily lives.

O God, we long to worship You fully. We are aware of our own inadequacies. We know of Your holiness and our sinfulness, We thank You for loving us and forgiving us. Teach us, Lord, how to worship. Through Your Son’s name, we pray. Amen. ■

<sup>1</sup>Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991)

### PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, our Divine Parent, we acknowledge that You are holy and we are common. You are Spirit and we are flesh. You are Eternal and we are momentary. Yet You call us to Yourself and we long to come and worship. Forgive and accept our feeble efforts to worship You. We long to love You and know You better. Hence, we come to this place today.

We bring You our sins, pain, burdens, doubts, fears, griefs, and brokenness. Heal us with Your love and may the radiance of Your grace and love give us peace and joy. We come to this sacred place to commune with You. Speak to us through the music and prayers, the words and the silence, the mystery and simplicity of this moment. O God, how shall we worship You? Teach us more in this hour. Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.