

September 12, 2010

A Sermon Delivered by the Rev. Judith Watt

First of a Four Part Series

Worship, Worthship, and Work of the People: Vision, Confession, Renewal, Dedication

Vision

Isaiah 6: 1-10

Luke 15: 1-10

One of my clergy colleagues worked as a young college student in one of the National Parks. By that time in his life, he knew he was headed to seminary after college graduation, having had his own conversion experience. One day during that summer job, he was leading a tour of other young college- aged men, some graduate students, through one of the park trails. One of the fellows had already admitted to my friend that he was either an agnostic or an atheist – wasn't sure about which, but didn't believe in God – didn't believe there was a personal God, anyway. When he'd found out that my friend was off to seminary, that's how the discussion of God or no-God had come up. On the trail, they had reached the edge of a cliff, and were staring over a gorgeous scene – mountains across the way, gorgeous blue sky, and a vista as far as one could see, the majesty and the glory of creation everywhere around them. Indescribable beauty. The kind of beauty that renders a person speechless.

After some silence, my friend leaned over to the fellow next to him – the one who had claimed he believed in no God, and said, "*Kinda makes you wish you had someone to thank, doesn't it?*" For a moment, there was no answer and then the fellow said "Yeah, yeah it does."

This is the first of a four part sermon series on Worship.

The idea for this sermon series presented itself one day last month. Behind a small chapel on Garrett Evangelical Seminary's property in Evanston there is an outdoor chapel garden. I had gone to Garrett that day to work in the library on one of August's sermons, but before I entered the building, I wandered over to this garden again, which I'd done many times while I was a student at Garrett.

At four places within the low lying hedge boundary of the garden, there is a station, each one marked with a sign, like the one you see projected. Vision, Confession, Renewal, and Dedication. The one marked Vision, projected in front of you, says, "*I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lofty. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.*" The words are from the passage in Isaiah you just heard. You enter the chapel garden area and the first station is Vision – and then you move on, to your right, and the next station several feet away, is confession. And so on. Vision, Confession, Renewal, Dedication. When you get to Dedication – you are at the exit place of the garden and you've made more or less a circle around the garden area. Vision, Confession, Renewal, Dedication - they are four significant signposts or stopping places or perhaps important blips on the spiritual journey.

These are aspects of worship, also. If you look at your worship bulletin today, you'll see that our worship service each Sunday is constructed using roughly the same categories.

We begin with Vision – a time to name blessings - a Call to Worship –an opening hymn. It is time again to focus our attention on a force outside of ourselves – to recognize that God exists – to allow ourselves to be lifted up into the presence of God.

Then, we confess our sin. We receive the assurance of forgiveness, hear the reading of scripture and the proclamation of the Word, along with music and we hope for renewal, renewed faith every week. And we end our worship service with Dedication – the call to go out again to serve.

Each and every Sunday, as we worship together, our order of worship takes us through an enactment of lived faith. On any given Sunday, each of us will be in different places on the journey, but on each Sunday, our worship time embodies the spiritual journey, and is a mini-reenactment of the life of faith.

Isaiah had had a vision of God. His vision of God was overwhelming. I've preached on this passage before and may have told you that it was one of the passages our Hebrew class in seminary had to translate. Hebrew is a picture language so the translation, when you translate literally, is missing all of the articles – the small words we have in English. I remember saying, when our group in class finished part of the translation that it sounded as though Isaiah had been on LSD or some other mind altering drug. His vision was an extraordinary, supernatural vision of God. And in that vision he experiences the awe of God – the wonder – the majesty – the hugeness of God. High on a throne – way off somewhere perhaps. But, what is extraordinary about that vision of God – bigger than life, beyond our humanness – is that God's robes – the fabric of God's robes-- fill the temple – ooze everywhere down into the temple – where human beings live part of their lives.

In this passage from Isaiah, part of the vision includes the seraphim singing. The seraphim were winged creatures – three pairs of wings, if you read the description again.

They sing, “ *Holy Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.*” Their song speaks to the awe and majesty and otherness of God.

The root word of holiness in Hebrew is separation. Their song speaks to the wonder of God’s otherness. Awe and majesty beyond humanity. That otherness, the awe of God, the power, the intensity of God’s light, is scary. It is scary because it is so intense. And so, we humans can’t stay there long. Throughout scripture that fact is reiterated. Even Moses couldn’t see God face to face. When the seraphims sing *Holy Holy Holy is the lord of hosts*, you could think of what they are singing as *Separate Separate Separate* or *Other Other Other* is the Lord of hosts.

In our theology, the risk of the claim of God’s holiness or God’s separation is a belief that God is completely other and therefore disconnected from our world. And disconnected from our lives. But the passage contradicts that vision – God’s robes come into the temple – fill the temple occupied by human beings. And the song of the seraphim contradicts the idea that God is disconnected, too. Because the seraphim begin *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts* – there’s the awe and wonder and majesty – and then they continue with their song - *the whole earth is full of his glory.*

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.

Visions of God don’t last long. You can’t package them up and put them in a box. Some of you, I know, have had visions of God – an experience of some sort that has lifted you up out of ordinary time into a space of time for a moment or so of the extraordinary. We yearn for those kinds of experiences. Our yearning is why we want to hold onto the experience. Others of you wonder if you’ll ever have an experience of God – if you’ll ever really sense God’s presence. And there are some of you who have

experienced a vision of God, a sense of God's awe and you don't realize it. You don't realize it because you haven't been given the language for it.

Have you ever had an experience where you just wanted to praise – to say thank you – but you didn't know who to thank? Or you didn't know where to direct the thanks?. It's an experience of being lifted up in joy – in wonder – a feeling of joy and well-being you can't explain – it just comes – and you find yourself wanting to thank someone. Creation, the beauty of creation, is one of the backdrops for this kind of experience but it can happen anywhere.

Mary Oliver writes a poem called *Yellow*. She says,

*There is the heaven we enter
through institutional grace*

*And there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
in a lowly puddle.*

The poet had been touched by a moment of noticing the beauty of some of God's creations in this world.

Have you ever looked at a painting or heard a piece of music that has made you fill up with tears or emotion? I think that is an experience of the awesomeness of God – creation – creativity. It is effected through the hands of human beings but it becomes for you, for a moment, more than the color on the canvas or more than the notes on the score. And you are lifted up into wonder that fills you with inexplicable tears or joy or sheer awe.

Or you are racing through your everyday life, and something happens unplanned – perhaps you are late and stopped in traffic, but because you arrive wherever it is, even

though late, somehow you run into someone that you have needed to see for so long and your meeting this person turns out to be important and crucial. Wonder if God is orchestrating that for you – filling your world with his touch. Perhaps the orchestration of your day, beyond your control, is a vision of God's grace. Because perhaps, as you watch your life unfold, you might see the hand of God in it. A vision of God for you.

Then, there's the vision of God we have in Jesus Christ, who told the story in Luke. The God who looks everywhere for us – like a woman who won't stop until she has found her lost coin, like the shepherd who has lost a lamb – keeps looking and looking until that lamb is found. That, too, is a vision of God and a vision of awe and wonder.

This past Friday evening I had occasion to talk to a woman I've known for some time who is involved in the arts in Chicago. She represents a jazz orchestra. We were talking about Mayor Daley's announcement that he would not seek office again. And I told her how many people I know, both especially outside of Chicago, who can't stand Mayor Daley. I tell the story I am about to tell, not about a Democrat but about a man in a high office. I could tell the same story about many, many Republicans, too. She told me a story about a time when she had an appointment to see Mayor Daley about the arts group she represented. She sat outside of his office. A Chicago policeman stood guard at the doorway. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a homeless man came in, wandered up to the hallway, receiving area outside of the mayor's office. "I want to see the mayor," he said to the policeman – "Can't I just see the mayor?"

The policeman said to the fellow, "The mayor is in a meeting. Sit over there." And the policeman went into the mayor's office and came out a few minutes later. The

homeless man said again – “Can’t I just see the mayor? – I want to see him – maybe he can help me”. And the officer told the man the mayor would see him in just a few minutes. And eventually the mayor came out and called the homeless man into his office and spent fifteen minutes with him.

My friend had been next on the mayor’s appointment schedule, but she said to me, “*I thought, when I saw that, that this story won’t ever make the news - - no one will ever know about it – but what I saw that day told me more about Mayor Daley than anything else could have. It made me think of the scripture about when you give to the least of these, you have given to me.*” For her, and for me when she told the story, it was another vision of God.

God’s **is** holy – separate from us, not like us – other than we are and awesome, **AND** God’s robes fill the temple. And in the fullness of time, God even came into the world in Jesus Christ, a servant, who wanted us to know that every one of our lives matter to God.

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts,
The whole earth is filled with his glory.