

WORSHIP OR SHOW?
ISAIAH 6:1-8
JANUARY 5, 1986

This morning we are dialoguing the sermon. I have asked Leroy to share the sermon with me as we look at the important Christian activity of worship. What is worship? Why do we worship? How do we worship? Is it worship or a show? We sometimes hear comments like, "I feel I have been to a concert rather than a worship service." Or, "Music is hogging the service."

Leroy: I've heard comments like, "Are they turning Catholic? Why are they chanting? Why are they saying 'holy catholic church' in the creed?"

Doug: How about the comment, "If they are having Communion, I'm not going!"

Leroy: How about, "If I don't get anything out of the sermon, I feel I haven't been to church."

Doug: Occasionally I hear the comment, "The organ is too loud, and the music is too classical."

Leroy: That is like the comment, "Why don't they have more contemporary music?"

Doug: I've even heard someone say, "Why don't they cut some of the opening exercises, the warm-ups, before the sermon?"

Leroy: "Why don't they cut the sermon?" That's a comment I've heard!

Doug: These comments indicate the lack of a common understanding of worship, particularly the Sunday morning worship of a congregation.

Leroy: And have you noticed the use of "they?" Who is "they?"

Doug: Leroy, why do we worship?

Leroy: Worship is unique. Worship is our response to God, the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Giver of our very lives. Life is a gift. So we worship primarily out of thanksgiving, maybe even guilt. Because we are indebted to God, we worship.

Doug: Do you really think some people worship out of guilt?

Leroy: In some branches of the Church, hell is a predominant factor of why not to live an ungodly life. People are afraid of going to hell so they go to church. But, worship has a significance all its own that cannot be explained as superstition or magic or expression of fear. It is a religious phenomenon, a mysterious reaching out to the Transcendent One. In this sense, it is profoundly human and, therefore, patterned after the important events within human existence such as life, birth, marriage, suffering and death. That is, it is patterned around the mostly constant features of our human history. We are compelled to worship out of our human experience.

Doug: In other words, there is something in us that wants to, that needs to worship. Even in the earliest of tribes, worship of some kind was an important part of their community life. Myths, magic, rites, dances have long been practiced; particularly the dramatization of the origins of life have been enacted in an effort to preserve identity and cohesiveness.

Leroy: All this may seem to be far removed from Christian worship, but never has Christian worship denied the values to be found in more primitive kinds of worship. Rather, it puts these values into an entirely new context, and enhances them.

Doug: What new context do you mean?

Leroy: Well, particularly our hope of life after death, our salvation through Christ. The paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection is the very heart of the sacraments of the church whereby through these rituals, the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection makes its power present to the people here and now. The church looks on to and reaches out to the fulfillment of all things in Christ. Our liturgical year from Advent to Pentecost follows the same course. We celebrate the recurring drama of God's act of salvation through Christ.

Doug: You mentioned drama. Kierkegaard, a famous Danish theologian, called worship a drama. The service of worship is a drama with four acts. A drama is presented on a stage by performers.

Leroy: In the worship drama, who is on the stage performing? I'm afraid that some think that the actors in the drama are the ministers, the choir, organist, acolytes and ushers, perhaps.

Doug: I'm afraid you are right. Too many people think that worship is something the choir and ministers do for them. They think they are the spectators. Therefore, they rate a worship service on how well they were entertained, what a good show it was or wasn't. But, the congregation is not in the audience in a worship service. The congregation is also on stage. The entire sanctuary is the stage on which the drama of worship is enacted.

Leroy: If the entire church is on the stage, who is in the audience?

Doug: God is the audience. Worship is something we all do for God. Out of gratitude for what God has done; in response to God's gift of life and God's gift of salvation, we offer our worship.

Leroy: Worship is not something we do for ourselves; it is something we do for God. When the choir sings, it is offering praise to God on behalf of the congregation. The choir's role is to help the congregation offer worship.

Doug: Therefore, we do our best. Would you feel comfortable offering to God something less than our best? When we hear comments that imply our music is too professional, would we want the choir to do something mediocre? Should a choir reserve its best for concerts and not the worship of God? Should the preacher do his/her best, or do people think God is pleased more by a sermon that is unplanned, poorly delivered, and second-rate?

Leroy: Offering God our best applies also to the congregation. When you sing the hymns, do you sing your best? Do you sing the words with meaning? Do you mumble or do you sing at all?

Doug: The worship service is a drama offered to God by a worshipping community. The worship service is a drama of four acts, patterned after Isaiah's vision in the temple, as was read in our Old Testament lesson. If you would like to follow along in the bulletin, our service begins with praise and thanksgiving, which is Act One. Isaiah wrote, (6:3) "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." During the first act—praise and thanksgiving—we hear the meditation which helps us prepare for worship. The candles are lighted symbolizing the presence of God. We sing the processional hymn. Sometimes the processional includes banners which dramatize God's triumphant victory. The hymn is followed by the Invocation and sometimes an anthem of praise.

Leroy: Act Two is confession. When Isaiah had a vision of God's glory, Isaiah was struck with his sinful nature. He exclaimed (vs. 5), "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!" In our service we hear a Call to Confession, we pray in unison the Prayer of Confession and receive God's pardon.

Doug: After Isaiah praised God and confessed his sins, he was then ready to hear a word from the Lord. In our service, the word of God comes to us from the Old Testament or one of Paul's letters and from one of the gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Leroy, why do we stand for the gospel lesson?

Leroy: Because God is impossible to grasp or to understand, the language of worship is communicated through symbols and ritual. We are, for some reason, afraid of ritual--symbolic representations of something bigger than ourselves, bigger than reason. In our liturgy, we perform symbolic acts rooted in tradition and shaped by history. For instance, standing for the Gospel Lesson is the symbolic act of respect for Christ whom we believe is truly present in His word to us. We believe that Christ speaks vividly to us today, and it is as if he came into the sanctuary to address his chosen disciples. The least we can do is to stand out of respect for him, our King.

Doug: The word of God comes to us in Act Three of the worship service through the Bible lessons, the creed which represents the period of church history following the biblical period, and the sermon which is an attempt to interpret the Bible lessons for our day. The Lord spoke to Isaiah in vs. 8 and asked, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Leroy: Isaiah answered, "Here am I! Send me." Isaiah responded to God's word by committing his life. Act Four in the worship service is consecration or dedication or commitment. This is represented in our service by the receiving and presenting of our tithes and offerings. The giving of our monetary offerings represents the commitment of our lives to Christ and his church.

Doug: So far in this sermon, we have addressed the questions: why do we worship and how do we worship? Before we conclude, let's underscore a very important part of worship, a part that is often misunderstood or not understood by congregations. Leroy, who does the worshipping?

Leroy: Of course, we have already made the analogy that the church is the stage and God is the audience; but what does that really mean?

Doug: Peter tells us that we are the "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." It is time we take this role seriously in our worship and accept the responsibility to be the chosen people, a community of faith.

Leroy: The community of faith is the relationship of faith and love between its members. This relationship in the first instance was created by Christ and is realized and strengthened through us by the sacraments. Particularly, Holy Communion is the sacramental sign of koinonia which means the union of minds and hearts in faith and love.

Doug: It is this people—the Easter people, the priestly people, the body of Christ, you and I—who celebrate the liturgy. The liturgy must have a form, a structure, that enables us as the people of God to worship. Christian worship, Christian liturgy cannot be a monologue. What is liturgy exactly?

Leroy: Liturgy simply means "the work of the people;" not the work of the ministers or the choir, but everyone.

Doug: And everyone includes children. I like to see children worship as part of the people of God. I don't like to bring children into the chancel and preach a children's sermon, as if they are separate or different from everyone else. Children have much to offer God through worship--singing in a choir, ringing bells, lighting the candles, offering prayer, etc. Participating in worship as members of God's people has a lasting effect on children.

Leroy: How well I remember as a child always being in church with my parents. I can recite to you now the liturgy that we used in the Lutheran Church at that time. Some think liturgy is repetitious, but it is a part of me, and in those times when I need to draw upon a vocabulary of prayer, it is there.

Doug: We have gone through an era when memorization was not a part of Sunday School curriculum. I'm glad that we again realize the importance of memorization. Also, a case can be made that simultaneous Sunday School and worship service-- where the children went to Sunday School while the parents went to the worship service-- has raised a generation of young adults who do not have the worship liturgy or the sense of identity with the worshipping community as a part of their lives. When children enter kindergarten, they are old enough to worship with the family.

Leroy: Worship is our corporate response to God's initiative--God, who has created us and reaches out to us in love.

Doug: We--you and I--are responsible for worship. It is an act we all must do together to give thanks to God and to celebrate our common belief and life in Christ. Worship is a privilege! Worship is not a show; it's a drama, an opportunity to offer God our best.

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