

The Practice of Passionate Worship<sup>1</sup>  
Isaiah 6:1-8  
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St. John United Methodist Church  
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Radical hospitality was Rose's topic last Sunday. One topic is linked to the other. If our church is to practice hospitality in a radical way then to keep them coming our worship must be dynamic and passionate. Notice the adjectives. What does it mean for worship to be passionate?

We think of the passion we have for sports in our society. Whether it is the World Series or the Super Bowl, people watch the games while jumping up and down on the couch or screaming in sports bars adorned in their team colors. Some die-hard male fans will take off their shirts, paint their chests with their favorite player's number, and alternately sit and stand for three hours in an open-air stadium in sub-zero temperatures.

We believe that healthy romantic relationships involve passion, and that good salespersons are passionate to make the big sale. Some are passionate about their hobbies and leisure activities like golf or hunting. Teenagers are passionate about hanging out with their friends.

So what does it mean when we attach the word *passionate* in front of the term *worship*? I am not so sure that we mainline Christians are known for being passionate on Sunday mornings. A parishioner approached a pastor after a Sunday morning service in which they had experienced passionate special music and said with passion, "I don't think we're that kind of church!"

Is St. John a church where our worship is passionate? Author Robert Schnase is saying that if a church is to be healthy and growing its worship life must be passionate.

We twenty-first-century mainline Christians may not be known for Passionate Worship, but it has not always been this way. John Wesley, for example, was a passionate preacher of the 1700's who led worship services characterized by passion. This does not mean that the people would jump on the pews and roll in the aisles, though Wesley notes in his journal that periodic "swooning" took place during some of the gatherings. I wondered about the definition of swooning. It means to feel ecstatic joy, even to be lightheaded. Have you ever been dizzy for God? In Wesley's day passionate worship was founded on the belief that God was indeed doing something significant in their midst, and thus there was an anticipation, a readiness to hear a word from the Lord, to be prepared for the Spirit to move in unexpected ways. So they sang their hymns with great joy and prayed earnestly.

A now retired superintendent said once that as he visited the churches in his district Sunday after Sunday, the biggest thing lacking in most of the preaching he heard was passion. It wasn't the message itself; it was the way in which it was delivered. He said that often he wasn't sure if the preacher believed what she or he was saying. If our preaching isn't passionate, how can we expect our worship to be passionate?

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon is blending of two sermons by Allan Bevere, Cambridge, Ohio and Gary Bullock, The Villages, FL. Offered as a resource by Abingdon Press and Robert Schnase.

In our scripture for today Isaiah helps us to understand three things. First, worship is about seeing God. It is not about anything that has to do with us. It is not about fellowship. It is not a performance. Worship is an encounter with God. Passionate Worship is the kind of worship that takes us to a new place where we can see God differently than we have ever seen God before.

Isaiah's problem is the same problem we have: this type of worship can't be described. He has done the best he could using human language to portray the experience he had that day in the temple. His words come out of apocalyptic literature, which is writing that says, *I don't know how to describe this. This is beyond anything that words could ever say. So, let me use some words to try to help you understand how powerful this was in my life.* Yet the words always fall short.

What was Isaiah's worship like? He sees angels; he sees the temple filled with smoke; he sees God in a way he had never seen God before. He sees the Lord and says, "In the year King Uzziah died," which is very specific. It is the year 740 B.C. Isaiah is saying, "I saw the Lord in the temple, and it made a difference in my life."

We all need to ask ourselves this question. What are we expecting when we come to worship? Do we come looking for God or to see our friends?

When we come to worship, the focus needs to be on the purpose in worship. It is like that sense of awe and wonder you get when you walk down a street in the midst of a big city. You are between all those tall buildings and you look up and say, "My goodness, how did anyone build that?" Or perhaps you are awe-struck by a structure you see somewhere—a gigantic, glorious, beautiful cathedral or other architectural marvel. *How did people build such a thing?* you wonder.

The works of God in nature are even more awe-inspiring. In the midst of our recent cold snap did you make time to look at the beauty? Whether it was a pink evening sky blended in with the blue tones or a close up of the hoarfrost on a tree branch or ice cicle, there is a sense of awe that comes with such natural beauty.

Wrap all of that up—all the feelings you have ever had about structures, about nature—and it doesn't come close to the awe, wonder, reverence, and adoration we experience when we worship together. When we center in on who God is in our lives, just as Isaiah did, we can't even begin to tell someone what is happening to us as we worship.

Worship is not just an individual thing. It is something we do together. There is a sense of unity that God creates among us when we worship together, and it moves us to a place where our quiet times of private worship become much more powerful. Or maybe they are not so quiet! Maybe you are one of those people who sings in the shower at the top of your lungs along with a Christian radio station or CD. Yet whether we praise God privately in quiet worship or not-so-quiet worship, it is in community that our worship is centered. And it all spreads from there.

Isaiah essentially says, "I saw the Lord differently than I have ever seen him before." And because of that, Isaiah sees himself very differently, too. And he says, "Oh, I am in big trouble! I am doomed! I have seen this God, and now I see myself for what I am. I'm a sinful person. I am a person of unclean lips who lives among a people with unclean lips." It is a sense of who he is versus who God is.

But here is the good news. It isn't Isaiah who makes a mad dash to find a coal to put on his lips to purge himself. He has nothing to do with what happens next in the

passage. He's standing there with his head hung down, thinking, *I'm doomed. There is no hope for me.* And then God sends a seraphim who places a hot coal on the very lips that just said they were sinful lips. Isaiah is purged by the grace of God in worship.

We discover God loves us anyway, and we encounter God in a new way. God comes to us and begins to cleanse us and change us and transform us into the people we are meant to be—into God's image. We're not going to be God, but we are certainly going to be a lot more like God because of what God can do in worship. Passionate Worship leads us not only to see God but also to see ourselves. Then, when we see ourselves for who we are, it's not over! God is there to cleanse us and change us forever.

What an awesome opportunity it is to worship in that sense—to be so close to God that God comes and touches us with grace, and we know it. We know that we've changed. We're different—not because we came looking for “what's in it for me,” but because we encountered the One who is God.

But it doesn't stop there, does it? Oh, no. This God we serve is a God who says, “Okay, I have these needs in my Kingdom. I need someone to go. Who am I going to ask to go?” And the same prophet Isaiah, who just two verses before was saying, “I'm doomed; I am in big trouble,” now stands on his own two feet, looks face to face with God, and says, “Here am I; send me.” Look what happened to him in worship. He went from one who had an encounter with God and realized his sinful nature to one standing firm and saying, “Here am I; send me.” This is transformation.

The change that happened to Isaiah in worship wasn't just for Isaiah. It was for what God could do through Isaiah by sending him out to those sinful people he lived among to tell them about the experience he had had with God. “Let me invite you to come to the temple,” Isaiah could say. “Let's see what happens for you in worship. Let me tell you what you need to do in order to open yourself up to a God who is ready to change you the same way he changed me.”

Worship is the encounter we have with God and the consequences that result from that encounter. When we worship passionately, we see God and understand who God is differently than we ever have before. We open ourselves up to God, discovering in the process that God is opening us. And we see the world and the needs of the world differently. We see those who are different differently. We don't see race or gender or age or sexual orientation.

When we see differently, we worship passionately; and it stirs our very souls. We encounter God and come to know how much God loves us. And we wait to see what God is going to do in our lives.

One of the things God is going to do is to lead us to the third practice of fruitful congregations: Intentional Faith Development. God is going to stir up within us a new sense of being intentional about our faith development. God is going to say to us, “I am not yet finished with you. I can build you, and I can do more with you as a Christian. Here is what I want you to do, and I want you to be very intentional about it.” So we adapt and say, “Yes, here I am; send me.”

And when we say, “Send me,” we should say, “Send me into a place where I can grow in my faith. Send me so that faith can shine forth to other people in Risk-Taking Mission and Service and in Extravagant Generosity.” These other practices we will be

talking about in the weeks ahead will flow out of a time when we have an encounter with God that changes us forever.

I invite you to continue to be in prayer about the Five Practices. We need all Five Practices. Passionate Worship opens us to God so that God may change us and grow us in our faith. This makes us people who will take risks and give ourselves away for God's cause here on earth.