



**A Sermon from Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor
Davidson United Methodist Church
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The Sermon Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

The Wonder of it All

I attended a seminar this week, at which time I heard a lecture on preaching by a well known professor of preaching. I am always fascinated by hearing such presentations because, you see, I never took a preaching course in seminary. I decided while in seminary that I did not want to really be a preacher since I was having issues with the church, God, theology, and the United Methodist Church. There was some wisdom in that decision. I mean, would you want a surgeon who was not sure about technique and questioned his ability to cut on you without confidence? I was going to maybe teach or something like that, so why take preaching?

Needless to say, you see what I'm doing this morning and have been doing for 38 years; operating without a license, so to speak. But you say, why did you not take some seminars in preaching later on when you realized that you were going to have to...well, preach most every week?

I did not take a preaching updates for the same reason that I will never take a tennis lesson. You see, I play a pretty good game of tennis. I'm self-taught and have put together a way of playing tennis that ends up with me winning a good share of the matches I play, but when a teacher of tennis watches me play tennis, he or she easily sees that I do most everything the wrong way. I hit the ball late, I do not hold the racquet with the right grip, and my stance when I hit the ball is all wrong.

A tennis pro friend of mine once said to me, "You play a good game of tennis, but why don't you let me give you some lessons?" "No way," I said, "because you and I know that you would have to take my game down to a new beginning and start with how I should hit the ball." "Yea," he said. And I said, "Look, I enjoy this game and I don't want to have to think about how I'm doing it while I'm doing it. It would take all the joy out of it, and besides I do not have the enormous amount of time it would take for you to show me how I really should play the game."

So now you know why I don't take preaching classes. Fortunately or unfortunately, you who listen are the ones who either benefit or suffer from my unwillingness to "start over." I'll get to the sermon in a minute, but bear with me and you'll see why I'm saying all this.

The professor of preaching last week asked those of us gathered to ask questions of our sermons, such as "What color is the sermon?" "What would the sermon taste like?" She said we should examine how our sermons are different and whether they need to vary.



So here goes: The sermon is red, it tastes like eggplant parmesan, and I'm going to start this sermon at the end instead of the beginning. (Are you now glad I don't take "lessons?")

The sermon color is red because I want you to not just hear words today, but experience the wonder of what worship really should be. The eggplant part, well, I like egg plant parmesan and I hope you will take in what I offer you today and experience the rich "taste" of what being with God is like.

And the starting at the end part...it's my attempt at trying to be different. Here is the end: to worship God is to step into a place of wonder that begins with you and me experiencing the majesty of a creation that is within and without. Now that I've done the end, let's begin...and I promise not to attend any more preaching lectures for a while.

The words you hear from Isaiah today are about a man who walks into church and God shows up. Is that going to happen today for you? Are you attending worship today, or is worship going to happen? What do you expect to happen today? What are you hoping will happen? What do you need to happen? What are you willing to offer to make worship happen?

You may say, "Well Jody, you may have never taken a preaching course, but it is your job to make worship happen." No, my task today is to provide a space for you to step into so that you might meet God in a special way. I cannot make worship happen, but you can if you want to really step into the place where God "will take us through the movements of worship until God has us in the place God wants us" (Richard Leonard, "Basileia," Winter 1986).

This scene from Isaiah is sometimes offered as the biblical model or order for worship, but it is really a suggested guide for us to experience the different movements of worship so that we can experience God's desire for us. Worship is mostly about wonder and awe, not so much about creeds or hymns or sermons.

We need worship more than ever because we are losing our sense of wonder and awe in a culture that speaks language of power and domination. Abraham Herschel said it best when he says that there are two approaches to life: We can approach life with wonder, or we can step toward life with expediency as our guide. The language of expedience is power and the desire to accumulate information. The language of wonder is poetry and a deep appreciation of life that leads us to a place where we want to respond.

What has happened to us is that we seem to be captured by a world view that convinces us that the person with the most answers and information wins. We long for control; a control manifests in our need to gain economic power and gain material goods. When we allow this need for control and expediency to become our priority and the main way of looking at life and ourselves, we start losing the sense of wonder about life. If we are not careful, we end up worshipping things.



On the other hand, to experience life as wonder is to step into mystery, to be willing to live with questions, to live courageously realizing that there is kind of ignorance that comes with admitting that we are powerless to solve all the mystery. Religion at its source is meant to lead us to the edge of that mystery and wonder, but it often becomes a way to simply gain more control and give us answers.

Today we have fundamentalists in Christianity shouting what beliefs we must hold and we have fundamentalists in Islam shouting about how wrong all those are who do not believe as they believe, thus making most of the world infidels. While all this shouting is going on, they and we miss the mystery and wonder of a God who longs for us to experience the divine rather than just talking about God.

Granvill Angell tells the story of a mother who sits in a sandbox with her young child. She draws a big circle in the sand and says, "Most people think of God as out there...outside the circle, but we live in here..inside the circle. When we think that God lives only out there and do not realize that God lives in here, too - within us - we live in a God-shaped hole and we often feel very alone."

I invite you into that God-shaped hole. I am not sure why you came to church today, but if it is not to step into that God-shaped hole then put aside the other reasons you came and let me do my job. Are you ready?

Worship begins and ends with wonder and awe. Wonder is "attention toward the extraordinary or mysterious...and awe is a reverence and respect for that which is larger than us" (Sam Trumborne thoughts 4/13/97). If you want to see this in a simple way, watch a child look at something new for the first time. Hand a child a multi-colored felt butterfly and watch as she slowly turns it and feels it and opens her eyes wide in awe at the mystery of what it is. We, on the other hand could be handed the same felt butterfly and wonder if it would look good as a refrigerator magnet or maybe be usable in a flower arrangement. We become utilitarian about how we make use of something, whereas worship begins with standing in the face of mystery and wondering how the mysterious God might make use of us.

Now, back to the color of this sermon (remember, it is red). It is the color of a vivid experience. Isaiah sees God high and lifted up with winged creatures flapping their wings in a fit of wonder and calling to each other, "Holy, Holy, Holy." The place is filled with smoke. It is a scene of wonder and awe that a mortal can stand in the place where God is.

So the first movement of worship is Wonder and Adoration; it is the "wow" of worship. It is acknowledgement of the grandeur of the Holy One. Einstein said the essence of all religion is not knowledge, but a sense of wonder which sparks the imagination. If this scene of wings flapping and strange creatures singing to one another does not engage your imagination, then you are not listening.

If we are not careful, we will lose our sense of wonder in a culture of words, beliefs, and codes. Religion can become a code or a routine rather than an experience. We begin our



worship with a Hymn of adoration and praise and then we affirm our faith to remind us that we are here because of God. We sing and affirm that it is a wonder that God is and that God cares.

Let me dip you into the waters of wonder for a moment. We live in the Milky Way Galaxy, which is 100,000 light years from one end to the other. Our galaxy circles around a larger group of galaxies, called the Virgo Cluster, which is made up of over 2,000 galaxies. In other words, that cluster of galaxies which is a mere 60 million light years away exerts enough gravitational pull on our Milky Way Galaxy to keep us revolving around it.

Our 200 plus billion stars rotate around a black hole at the center of our galaxy, which has the energy of 4,000,000 of our suns. The closest galaxy to us is the Andromeda galaxy, which is 2.5 million light years away. You can see it as a tiny dot in the night sky if you know where to look. By the way, I don't mean to cause you to lose any sleep, but because of its position, the Andromeda galaxy seems to be rushing in our direction at 500,000 miles per hour, which means we are headed for a collision with it. You still have time to go to the grocery store to stock up though since this encounter will happen in about 2.5 billion years.

According to the latest findings of the Hubble telescope, we are not alone in the galactic universe. As we rotate around the center of our own galaxy in what is known as a galactic year, which takes about 250 million years, we have discovered that there are over 200 billion other galaxies all rotating in their orbits.

I do not have any smoke and wings for you this morning, but please for "God's sake" stop a moment and feel the wonder of it all and awe that God made all of this and God made you and me. You are now in the presence of this God of the galaxies. What shall we do?

The next thing Isaiah shows us to do after we sing "wow" what a mighty and grand God you are...and, by the way, did you notice that the creatures sing to each other? That is called antiphonal response. It is why we do responsive readings and why in our Communion liturgy today you will hear a line sung and you will respond in an antiphonal way...it all started with dear old Isaiah 2,500 years ago.

...back to what comes next. Isaiah basically says, "My God, what am I doing here? I am not worthy to stand in the presence of such a God. I am unclean. I've messed up. In the presence of such goodness, I see my own dirt."

This is why we confess our sins each worship service. It is not because of shame. It is because we need the God of the galaxies to help us be clean and whole again. And this God wants that for us. This is not a record keeping God who gets some cosmic kick out of writing a ledger of our sins. This God wants healing for us so in our story one of the winged creatures brings a burning coal from the altar of God and places it on Isaiah's lips. Now before your imagination takes you to the last time you tried to drink a too hot cup of coffee too quick and burned your tongue, this is the bible's way of saying that God longs to



burn the bad stuff away and forgive us. So we offer our prayer of confession and we hear God's words of forgiveness as we repeat the words of absolution, "your sins are forgiven."

After we say wow and ask for help in getting our lives back together again the next movement of our worship is outward. The reason for this is what happens next in the story. Isaiah hears the God of the galaxies ask for something. It seems the God of all the created order needs "us." God asks, "Whom shall I send...who will go out there for me?"

The last part of our worship is the response to that question. We offer our gifts as a response. The sermon is offered as a response. And then we sing a hymn of going forth to remember that we are called to go out there and do God's bidding. In our church, we say together our mission statement before we leave. We also come to the Lord's Table because we are invited to respond to what Christ does for us...we baptize children and adults because of the invitation by God in Christ to come and be blessed that we might be a blessings.

Can you see that this is all a "movement of worship" and we are called in wonder and praise to respond with who we are? Sometimes we can worship with glad hearts as we marvel at God's goodness. Other times when we come to worship, we can barely hold our heads up because life beats us down and we simply need to lean into the ever lasting arms of a God whom we may not understand but whom we need to hold us.

O the wonder of it all...and maybe you thought this was just an ordinary worship service. This should be and can be a moment of experiencing the divine mystery of a God who somehow made billions of galaxies and who also needs "you." This God needs you to say "wow"...this God needs you to say, "I'm sorry." This God needs you to pay attention to the story in the scriptures and make it your story. And this God needs you to response when this God asks, "Who will I send to do my work, heal my world, and tell my story?" What is your response?

If you have not worshiped yet...come with me...the color is red, the taste is rich and powerful...ready?? Think of the wonder of it all...

Let us praise the God of Creation in whose hands this earth is spinning at 1,038 miles an hour at the equator and around 800 miles an hour here in North Carolina...a God who beholds our earth revolving around a sun at 67,000 miles an hour and a galaxy that speeds at 550,000 miles an hour around its center. Close your eyes and feel the spinning of a God who keeps up with you. We praise you, O God of the universe.

Let us confess to our God...we have forgotten you. We behave as if we are self-made people. We adore our possessions and forget the needs of your struggling people. We are often times selfish and we have hurt others and ourselves by our deeds. We need you to help us regain our balance. Cleanse our hearts O God and renew a right spirit within us. We know we need you to help us.



We thank you for paying attention to us, O God, even when we do not pay attention to you. For all that we have..our life..your spirit planted within as close as our breath...the space in us that only you can fill..that God hole...Thank you for the gift of life.

We ask you to help us, O God, for we cannot do life alone...we have tried. We get scared...we get lonely...we gain independence, but we end up still needing you...help us in our helplessness for sometimes our bodies do not do what we want..we age and death seems to laugh at us sometimes...help us remember that your son Jesus laughed in the face of death for us all because you are not only the God of the stars, you are the God of life and you hold even death in your hands...beyond the farthest star new life waits.

And finally we respond, O God, with your servant Isaiah as we say in response to your call, "Whom shall I send?" We say "Here I am; send me."