

**"Encounter God Through Worship"**

**Sermon Series on *The Big 3 of the New Vision***

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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**

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**(Isaiah 6:1-9a)**

This morning marks the beginning of a series of sermons that I'm calling "The Big 3" of the New Vision for First Pres which the Session approved for our church earlier this year. The Big 3 are part of a new Vision Frame which expresses the mission, vision, and values of our church, and along with what we're calling *Connect and Engage*, the new three-year strategic plan for First Pres. These are the next steps the leadership of our church believes God wants us to take in our journey of faith as a congregation. In future sermons and in articles that will appear in *First This Week*, you will learn more about of all this in the coming weeks and months.

Today I'm going to give you a quick overview of the Vision Frame right now, and it consists of the Missional Mandate, the Missional Motives, the Missional Map, and the Missional Measures. The Missional Mandate (or the Mission Statement) of our church remains the same: "Our mission is to invite all people to say 'Yes!' to Jesus with their whole lives."

The Missional Motives (or the Values) – the passions that drive us for this next season of ministry are: Belonging to one another; Celebrating intergenerational community; Grappling with God's Word; Being transformed by grace; and Living Missionally for others. We could do a whole sermon on each of

these values by themselves (and maybe we will), but for now we're just giving an overview.

The Missional Map, or the strategy, Session approved is what I'm calling the Big 3 of the new vision. They are: Encounter God through worship; Equip one another in Discipleship; and Engage the World in Mission. For the next three weeks, we're going to look at each of these priorities, and our hope and prayer is that every covenant partner will pledge to join with us in living out these three commitments in our personal lives.

Finally, the Missional Measures of the new vision are ways we can assess how well we're doing in living out the new vision of our church. They involve asking ourselves a series of questions on a regular basis. Am I saying "yes" to Jesus by: Receiving Joyfully; Worshipping Wholly; Listening Expectantly; Loving Authentically; Proclaiming Prayerfully; Serving Humbly; and Living Missionally. There is a LOT to digest here, and hopefully in the year to come we'll be able to take some time and unpack these important questions and study how we measure up as individuals and as a congregation.

There are other aspects to this new strategic plan we'll share with you later, but for now I want to focus on the 3 "invitations" the Session extends to every covenant partner of our church. These are the basic expressions of the Christian faith in discipleship to which the leadership of our church invites everyone to commit to. The three invitations are: Encounter God through Worship; Equip One Another in Discipleship; and Engage the World in Mission. For the next 3 weeks we will take each of these invitations and dig a little deeper into what they mean as we take the next step in

following Christ together as a church. Today we'll talk about encountering God through worship.

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In a previous church I served the preschool of that congregation taught the children about worship, even though the kids probably weren't aware of it. On Valentine's Day the teachers had all the kids make a Valentine for God, and each child was invited to draw a picture and write something from their heart to the Lord which expressed their love for God. Later that day, the kids took their valentines and placed them on the communion table in the sanctuary as an act of worship. Our church's children's director found the cards on the communion table, and she shared them with me. I want you to see a few of them.

Brooklyn wrote, "Dear God, I love you and I want to give you a Valentine. Thank you for making me real."

One child wrote: "Dear God, I like you. I wish I could bring you cake."

Another said: "Dear God, I love you. Love is like fireworks!"

Cal wrote: "Thank you for letting me play sports. You made me so I can run."

A final one that was unsigned says, "Thank you for the Tooth Fairy. Thank you for the moon and mother nature shows." And there is a beautiful drawing of the Tooth Fairy and a big tooth coming to their house.

We can learn a lot from the way children worship God. Their honesty, authenticity, and simple words express what they feel. There is no pretense, no trying to sound spiritual, holy, or eloquent. They just say what's on their mind and in their heart.

The primary thing that happens whenever we encounter God in worship, whether we're a child or an adult, is a shift that takes place in the center of our being. We shift away from what we're doing to what God is doing, away from what is undone (in the world or in our lives) to what God has already done, away from myself to the Lord and other people, and away from an uncertain future to a sure and solid hope in Jesus Christ. Real worship re-orientes and re-centers our lives in a way that sometimes results in a change of perspective that can often lead to a complete change in direction. That's what happened to the prophet Isaiah 23 centuries years ago.

When Isaiah encountered God in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book that bears his name, he experienced a profound and radical shift in his life. The result was that he saw the Lord in a new light, and he worshipped God in a deeper way than ever before. It was 740 BC, the year when Uzziah, the king of Israel, died. Isaiah was in the temple in Jerusalem, and there he saw a heavenly vision. God was seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and Scripture says that the train of His robe filled the temple. Above and around Him were a number of seraphs, angelic creatures, and they called to one another saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory!" In Isaiah's vision the sound of their voices shook the doorposts and thresholds of the building, and the place filled with smoke.

Isaiah was shaken to his core, and he cried out in repentance, “I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live with people who are just like me! My eyes have seen the Lord Almighty!”

The prophet was distraught because he thought that anyone who saw God would immediately die, and his vision of the Lord scared him half to death. However, the prophet didn’t die. Instead, one of the angels took a burning coal from the altar in the temple and touched his mouth. And the angel said, “Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.”

Then God Himself spoke to Isaiah and asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

The prophet replied, “Here am I. Send me!”

And God responded, “Go and tell the people....”

There was nothing in Isaiah’s life that prepared him for this encounter with God. I’m sure when he got up that morning, it never once crossed his mind that the Lord would reveal Himself to the prophet with such powerful and life-changing way. But that’s how God is. Sometimes He shows up when we least expect Him, and in worship we are given an opportunity for a fresh insight into who God is and who we are called to be as His people.

There are several key elements to Isaiah’s encounter with God to which people have pointed over the years which suggest a pattern we can follow in even how we design our worship services as Christians. And you will notice this “spine,” as we might call it, in the structure of the worship services at First Pres regardless of the style of music or the location of the service. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, was one person who emphasized this.

- First, there is the adoration of God (by the angels).
- Next, there is a confession of sin (Isaiah’s “I’m ruined; I’m sinful!).

- Then there is the forgiveness of God and the assurance of His pardon. (The coals from the altar and the pronouncement by the angel which brought comfort to Isaiah.)
- Next is the Word of God when the Lord speaks and says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”
- This is followed by Isaiah’s response when he replies, “Here am I; send me!”
- Finally, the Lord commissions Isaiah, and He gives him an assignment (“Go tell the people...”).

Authentic worship, whether it includes these elements or others, should re-center our lives and re-focus our vision. It should convict us of our shortcomings and comfort us with the message of God’s grace. And it should reorient our priorities and at times even shake us to our core.

John Ortberg has observed that nobody ever went up to Jesus after one of His blistering warnings about religious hypocrisy and shook Jesus’ hand and said, “Thanks, rabbi. That was a nice sermon today.” No one went up to Moses after the thunder, lightning, and the loud trumpet blast at the foot of Mount Sinai and said, “How come we’re using trumpets now? Whatever happened to Miriam and that tambourine song we used to sing after we crossed the Red Sea? I liked that song – it was peppy. This thunder and trumpet stuff is way too loud and heavy for me.”

The general sense one gets from the writings of Scripture is that when God shows up, people get blown away. They fall to the ground, they hide their faces, they glow like light bulbs, and they beg for mercy. When was the last time something like that happened to you in worship? Is there something missing in our worship these days?<sup>1</sup>

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I think most of us have too narrow a definition of worship. More often than not, when we say the word “worship,” we think of a worship service here at church, or even just the singing portion of a worship service. “I really enjoyed the worship today,” we might say to someone as we walk out. However, while my hope and prayer is that worship does indeed take place during our services on Sunday mornings, I think that’s too narrow an understanding of what the Bible calls worship.

You see, worship isn’t just what happens on Sunday mornings at church. Rather, it’s a life-altering way of living. God wants us to encounter Him every day as we go about our daily lives, not just here on Sunday mornings. Worship is a new way of seeing, feeling, and living that redraws the boundaries of our lives, reorders the relationships in our families, and renews the parched spirits of our souls which are all too often dry and thirsty.

This kind of worship can take place anywhere. Sure, it can happen in church, and I pray it does. But it can also happen when you’re walking on the beach or hiking in in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It can happen at the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. It can happen when you boot up your computer and read an email from a long-lost friend, or when you find something precious which was lost that you had been desperately looking for. Worship is an awareness of God in everyday life which also results in sensitivity to the needs and

the people around you in the world. It's loving God and loving neighbor, just like Jesus said. At its simplest that's what worship is all about.

A few years ago, I read a book that pulled me up short and showed me just how shallow my worship of God really is all too often. It's by my friend Mark Labberton, who is the president of Fuller Seminary, and the book is entitled *The Dangerous Act of Worship*. In it he writes that one Sunday he was preaching on Psalm 27, which is a great psalm of hope for God's deliverance from fear for those who face tough times. Mark felt like he did a good job preaching the passage, and many people told him after the service it was a "nice" sermon.

However, later that week he attended a dinner sponsored by International Justice Mission. IJM is a Christian human-rights organization that seeks justice for people facing various forms of oppression around the world. Elisabeth, a beautiful seventeen-year-old girl from Southeast Asia, spoke at the dinner. She had grown up in a strong Christian home and memorized Bible verses, which became all the more important to her during the year she spent in forced prostitution, enslaved in a brothel in a major Asian city.

As she spoke, she showed a picture on the screen of her room in the brothel. Over the bed where she was so brutally treated, she had written these words on the wall: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" These are the opening verses of Psalm 27.



Mark sat listening to Elisabeth's story of being forced into the sex trade when she was just sixteen. Then he thought back to the previous Sunday and his sermon on the same psalm, remembering some of the fears he had listed for the people in his church. Those were legitimate fears for Mark and his congregation, but now none of them seemed quite as consequential as the ones Elisabeth faced.

Then Mark had an image of a silent movie going through his mind – listening to Elisabeth while envisioning his congregation gathering for worship on a random Sunday. While they were busy trying to park their cars in Berkeley, CA, that morning, a task “so totally horrible,” as one person said to him recently, girls like Elisabeth were coming to worship in their settings too. She came before God in her windowless room in the brothel. They did so in their glass-walled sanctuary. And all of them worshipped in their own way.<sup>2</sup>

I don't share this story to shame us. That's not my point. I share this story of Mark and Elisabeth to wake us all up and realize there is so much more to worship than what we do here on Sunday morning, and there is so much more at stake than what we are usually aware of when we think of worship.

According to the Bible worship names what matters most. It's the way human beings created in the image of God best reflect His glory by seeking His face, embodying His character, and trying to live in a way that pleases and honors Him. That kind of worship redefines everything we call ordinary. The Westminster Catechism says it well: “What is the chief end of humanity? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

It's the hope and prayer of the elders and pastors of this church that you and I will take the next step to encounter God through worship every day in the coming year in perhaps a new way. Let me encourage you to take the next step simply by being regular in your attendance at worship services this year. And if you're still only joining us virtually online, you're short-changing yourself from experiencing all that God has in mind for you.

I know that some of you are not physically able to attend or you are immune-compromised, and I understand that. But many of you have settled for convenience, and you really should make the effort to be here with us. Let me also encourage you to take the next step by spending time daily in the worship of God. Read the Bible every day, reflect on the truths of Scripture, and reorient your day in prayer. Maybe even sing a song to God and be a choir of one. And also have family devotions.

Finally, take the next step by developing a greater awareness of God in your life and cultivate a practice of talking to the Lord throughout the day. Thank him for an unexpected parking spot. Praise Him for the gift of a friendship. Tell Him you're sorry for being so impatient. And express your love for Christ by serving someone who needs your help. You can even make a Valentine card for God and put it on the communion table, if you like.

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I want to close by telling you a story I've shared with you before, but it bears repeating. In one of his radio programs about life in Lake Woebegone, Garrison Keillor recalled his childhood Thanksgiving dinners as the family gathered around the table and remembered the blessings of the past year. Uncle John usually gave the prayer, which always caused everyone to squirm a little. As Garrison Keillor put it, "Everybody in the family knew that Uncle John couldn't pray without talking about the cross or without crying....Sure enough, Uncle John prayed, talked about the cross, and he cried. Meanwhile, the rest of us shifted nervously from one foot to the other and longed for the prayer to end." Then Keillor added this powerful observation: "All of us knew that Jesus died on the cross for us, but Uncle John had never gotten over it."<sup>3</sup> That's what worship will do to a person.

May you and I become more like Uncle John and never get over what God has done for us in Christ. May our celebrations of worship be instruments of grace which transform our lives with a greater awareness of God's love. May we cultivate an awareness of Jesus in everyday life which causes us to stop and marvel at the small miracles that come our way. And may we have a renewed commitment to do what we can to take the next step in our own discipleship by going deeper into the heart of God and deeper into the heart of worship. Let's take the next step and encounter God through worship as we follow Christ together! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> John Ortberg in the preface to Mark Labberton's book, *The Dangerous Act of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 7.

page 12

<sup>2</sup> Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 34-35.

<sup>3</sup>Taken from Bill Bouknight in "Standing in the Light of the Cross", *Good News*, Mar./Apr. 2002, 21.