

July 19, 2015
Why Go to Church?
Isaiah 6:1-8

Opening Words: William Temple once said, "*Worship is quickening the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purging the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God, and devoting the will to the purpose of God.*" I hope you remember that quote, because it acts as perfect background for this evening's text.

We are instructed today from the Old Testament. We are in the book of Isaiah. The name Isaiah means "The Lord Saves." He began his ministry about the year 740 B.C., which makes him a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Micah. He lived in politically stormy times. The Assyrian Empire was expanding; Israel was declining. Maybe that is why the people are hungry for God. The major themes of this book are judgment and salvation. Our scripture reading is Isaiah 6:1-8. Let me call this message *Why Go to Church?*

Isaiah 6:1-8 1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

I love this story. One Sunday morning King Louis XIV of France, who held the throne in the 17th century, went to church with his attendants. When they arrived they discovered they were the only ones present. He looked at the court preacher, Francois Fenelon, and asked, "What does this mean?" Fenelon replied, "I had published that you would not come to church today, in order that your Majesty might see who serves God in truth and who simply wants to flatter the king." How many people do you know who go to church for the wrong reason? How many people do you know who don't go to church at all?

The statistics really are shocking. The church is becoming less influential all the time. Consider these facts with me:

*In 1924, fifty percent of all mothers wished their children would develop a loyalty to a local church. Today, only 22% of mothers long for their children to be loyal to a local church.

*In our time, only 44% of all Americans go to church regularly. That makes us number eleven on the list of Christian nations. The Christian nation with the highest percentage of regular worshippers is Nigeria at 89%. Ireland is second at 84%. Mexico is number ten at 45%. Maybe that is one of the reasons our society has so many problems?

*Even people who say they go to church regularly really don't. Forty-eight percent of all self-proclaimed worshippers attend only one worship service per month. We have redefined "regular" worship here.

The question is begging to be asked. Why don't people go to church?

Willow Creek conducted a survey and asked the question, why don't you go to church? These are the five main most common reasons:

1. Church is boring.
2. Church is irrelevant.
3. Churches are always asking for money.
4. They are too busy to go to church.
5. Church makes people feel uncomfortable.

Let me respond to those five things by making two comments.

1. Church can be boring. The talking head behind the pulpit and music that was popular in the 1800s can't compete with modern high tech entertainment. We are the Amish of the 21st century.

2. Church can be ugly. How many "church victims" do you know? How many good people have been burned in some ugly church conflict?

So with this in mind, let me ask you the question of the morning: why go to church? I know I am preaching to the choir. If you come to church on a Sunday morning in July, then you are really faithful to this church. We could compile a long list of why people go to church. However, I don't have time to look at them all; I only have time to look at three. These three things are unique to the life of the church. You will not find these three things anywhere else in society. You will not find these three things in your golf league, walking in the woods or in your second cup of coffee. You will only find these three things by going to church. Each one is illustrated for us in our scripture lesson. This is what Isaiah teaches us. We go to church to experience **God**. We go to church to hear the **truth**. We go to church to discover a **purpose** for our lives.

So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

God

The first reason we go to church is to experience God. The great Italian poet Dante Alighieri failed to kneel at the appropriate moment. His enemies hurried to the bishop and demanded that Dante be punished for his sacrilege. Dante defended himself by saying, *"If those who accuse me had had their eyes and minds on God, as I had, they too would have failed to notice events around them, and they most certainly would not have noticed what I was doing."* I hope that is not your story. We come to church to experience God!

In today's scripture lesson we are told that Isaiah had a vision. In Isaiah's vision, he is experiencing God. The first four verses of the text try to explain what he saw when he looked at God. The Lord is seated high and exalted. His robe fills the temple and He is surrounded by divine creatures. Don't get lost in the details of the text; look at the text in general terms. Isaiah is experiencing God, and I believe what you really want when you come to church is to experience God. The most basic function of the church is to help you experience God.

As the spiritual leader of this church, it is my goal for you to experience God each week. If you are not experiencing God each week, then I have failed. That is why I spend hours each week writing a single sermon. That is why we have one of the finest church choirs and organists I have ever heard. They set the stage for you to experience God. That is why we offer different styles of worship service. No two personalities are the same. There are so many details in the life of the church, but they exist for one reason, to help you experience God. The single goal of every church is not to just survive, it is get you to experience God. For once you experience God, everything in your life will change.

That is why it is Satan's goal for you to never experience God. He doesn't want you to change; he likes you just the way you are. So he promotes secondary things in the life of the church to a primary position. Have you ever been so preoccupied during worship about some secondary thing in the life of the church that you didn't experience God? The temperature is too low. The sound system is too loud. The usher isn't wearing a tie. The greeter didn't know your name? The person next to you is annoying. The tables and chairs have to be set up for the next dinner. I could go on, but you get the point. Satan doesn't want you to experience God, so he promotes secondary things. How many secondary things have your attention right now? You have come to church for one reason, to experience God! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Truth

The second reason we come to church is to hear the truth. We go to church to learn about God. Look at the text with me one more time. Isaiah is having a vision. In his vision he is experiencing God. When you experience God one thing happens every time.

As you stand next to the perfection of God, your imperfections become obvious. The contrast is shocking. In the text, Isaiah identifies his imperfections. Verse 5 says, *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."* Verses six and seven are key. They tell us something about the very nature of God. God does not strike him down because of his imperfections. God has a solution to his imperfection. The hot coal is placed on his lips and his guilt is taken away. Isaiah learns that God is a loving God. If he had not experienced God, then his poor theology would have remained uncorrected. One of the reasons we have a poor national theology is that only 44% of all Americans go to church. In church we learn the truth about God. If you don't go to church, then you will learn about God from other unreliable sources.

Consider these two quotes with me. Augustine once said, *"Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God."* The great theologian of yesteryear Rudolph Bultmann once said, *"Within each one of us is a faint recollection of Eden calling us home."* What do those quotes mean? They mean that within each person there is a spiritual hunger that must be satisfied. If people no longer go to church, then they will find their spiritual food in other places. It happens all the time; it is becoming more common all the time. Let me ask you a few questions. You can answer them in your heart.

1. How many people do you know who have built their theology on some Hollywood production? (No, Moses did not look like Charlton Heston and Jesus did not have blue eyes.)
2. How many people do you know who are fascinated with angels? (I am not against angels. However, they are not primary characters in the Biblical narrative. Angels are messengers, not saviors or protectors.)
3. How many people do you know who occasionally wander into the local fortune teller or medium? (There is a dangerous side to this entertainment.)
4. How many people do you know who believe in works righteousness? (You can't earn your way into heaven by your good works. Basic Christian theology teaches us we are saved by grace and by grace alone.)
5. How many people do you know who read their horoscope daily, but haven't read their Bible in years?

The second reason people come to church is to hear the truth. We come to church to learn about God and his plan of salvation for the world. How much do you know about God? How much of your personal theology is built on something you found outside of the church? If you have learned a little more about God, say, **"Amen!"**

Purpose

The third reason people come to church is to discover the purpose of life itself. You were born to be more than a consumer. You were created for a purpose. The scripture lesson ends with the famous words of verse 8, "*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"*" Isaiah hears something in his vision that we often forget. Life is not about us, life is about others. The world tells us the key to a happy life is making yourself the star of your universe, like the Kardashians. The church reminds us that the key to a happy life is serving others. Researchers tell us people who serve others live longer, happier lives. Wouldn't you like to live a longer, happier life? Our world is filled with problems. God expects you to make a positive difference.

Hudson Taylor was scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as "*our illustrious guest.*" Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "*Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.*" I hope that is your story. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Let me end with our opening quote and a challenge.

Do you remember our opening words? William Temple once wrote, "*Worship is quickening the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purging the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God, and devoting the will to the purpose of God.*"

When was the last time you invited someone to go to church with you? Our society is filled with non-worshippers. You must know someone. Inviting someone to church may be the kindest thing you ever do. Because, when you invite someone to church you are giving them the opportunity to **experience God**. When you invite someone to church you are giving them the opportunity to **hear the truth**. When you invite someone to church you are giving them an opportunity for a **longer, happier life**. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"