

March 19, 2017

Don't Give Up!

Don't Give Up Worship!

Isaiah 6:1-8

Opening words: Did you know 24% of all Americans observe the season of Lent? Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means "spring." Excluding Sundays, because every Sunday is a little Easter, Lent is a forty-day period. Why forty days? Because, Jesus fasted forty days before being tempted by Satan. Lent began on Ash Wednesday and will end on Holy Saturday. Every year we are asked the same question. "What are you going to give up for Lent?" Maybe this is a better question: What are you not going to give up for Lent? Never forget, Lent is not a season of self-deprivation, it is a season of spiritual renewal.

This is sermon number four in my six-part sermon series, *Don't Give Up!* We are looking at five of the twelve spiritual disciplines. So far, we have looked at prayer and fasting. In the next two weeks, we are going to look at reading the Bible and meditation. Today, we are going to look at worship. Did you know 51% of all Americans say they go to worship at least once a month? I don't know about you, but that figure surprises me. In my experience, it seems high. However, worship is one of those things we should never give up. Our scripture reading for today is Isaiah 6:1-8. Let me call this message *Don't Give Up Worship!*

Isaiah 6:1-8 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.² Above him were seraphim, 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 seraphim 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!"

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.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, before our country was torn apart by the Civil War, before Columbus discovered a New World or a man named Jesus was resurrected, there was a man who spoke on behalf of God. His name meant "The Lord Saves" but we just call him Isaiah. 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 his people were hungry for God. Perhaps, that is why he spoke of the dark topics of judgment and salvation. No one has ever liked change. However, what is more important to us this morning than our exegetical understanding is our scripture reading. There is a very practical side to Isaiah's words. Today's sacred words remind us of the importance of worship.

In July of last year, my wife, Kathryn, was appointed to be the pastor of the Lowellville United Methodist Church. She asked for an appointment for two reasons. She had too much free time and she missed preaching. Her church is not a large membership church. It is a small membership church. As a matter of fact, it is one of the smallest churches in the Mahoning Valley District. When she arrived, they averaged about eleven worshippers per Sunday. In the past eight months, she more than doubled the worshipping body. Last week was a big day in Lowellville; they had twenty-five in worship. I am so proud of her. That is not easy to do. Yet, part of that group seems to be confused. There are about six people who come to church but never participate in worship. They come to church and spend worship time getting the snacks ready for the coffee hour. Can I state the obvious? When you only had eleven and six left, the congregation grew a little thin. I suppose you could get mad at the six. I look at it differently. I feel sorry for the six because they are missing the best part of church. There is a side of me that pities them. Just think about it.

God

If you don't attend worship, then you won't experience God! In today's scripture lesson, we are told that Isaiah had a vision. In Isaiah's vision, he was 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.

As the spiritual leader of this church, it is my goal for you to experience God weekly. 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 a choir and an organist. 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. Have you ever stopped to consider all the details in worship? Each detail exists for one reason, to help you experience God. The single goal of every church is not to just survive. The goal of every church is to 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 need to be set up for the next dinner or fundraiser. The minister is too handsome ☺. 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?

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. Everyone should come to church to experience God! When you came to church today did you expect to experience God? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Truth

If you don't worship, then you won't 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 fewer Americans are worshipping all the time. In church, we learn the truth about God. If you don't go to worship, 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 have nothing 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?

When you come to worship, you 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? Just because you have a thought or opinion about God does not make you wise or correct. If you could stand learning 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 in this troubled world.

When I was young my best friend was Jimmy Thompson. We lived in the same neighborhood. As a matter of fact, he lived only five doors up. I can't tell you how many countless hours we spent together. Being the same age, we were in the same

class. I never had a brother, but I had something better, Jimmy. He was always fun and we shared one another's dreams and secrets. I will never forget the day he told me his parents were getting a divorce. His father didn't want to leave, but his mother wanted a trial separation. Once Mr. Thompson saw what life was like away from Mrs. Thompson, he refused to return. He was the foundation of that family. Once he was gone, the family crumbled. Jimmy seemed to suffer the most. He struggled to get through our freshman year in high school. Near the beginning of our sophomore year he dropped out of school. Even at that age I was shocked by the news. I never really saw Jimmy after that. He moved in with his sister and brother-in-law in another area of town. He got a job as a bag boy at the local grocery store, the Golden Dawn. Years later, a mutual friend told me that was best job Jimmy ever had. It pains me to say it still today. Without the discipline, encouragement or knowledge of school, Jimmy stopped advancing in life. He never lived up to his full potential. People responded to the news that Jimmy dropped out. Some were mad at his father. Some were mad at his mother. Some were mad at Jimmy. I was never mad at Jimmy. I pitied Jimmy. Can I ask you a question?

Do you know of any dropouts? I don't mean school dropouts. I mean church dropouts. Don't be mad at them. Pity them because they are missing so much. Don't tell me worship isn't important. In the life of the church we can eliminate everything but worship and still be a church. In worship, we experience God! William Temple wasn't wrong! 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."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**