

February 24, 2019

We Believe

*We Believe in the Church*

Isaiah 6:1-8

**Opening words:** Let us begin by remembering the words of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
the third day he rose from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic\* church, (\*universal)  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Today, I am going to continue my sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, *We Believe*. To date, we have looked at the Apostles' understanding of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins. Next week, I will look at the Apostles' understanding of heaven. Today, our topic is the church.

One Sunday morning, King Louis XIV of France (1638-1715), who held the throne in the 17<sup>th</sup> 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." The point was made. Why do you come to church? 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? Our scripture reading for today is Isaiah 6:1-8. Let me call this message *We Believe in the Church*.

**Isaiah 6:1-8** 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

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

<sup>5</sup> "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."

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

<sup>8</sup> 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!"

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Years ago, before a civil war threatened to divide America, before Columbus discovered the New World or before Rome conquered their world, there was a man who spoke on behalf of God. His name meant "The Lord Saves," but we simply call him "Isaiah". He is considered the greatest of the writing prophets. His writings reveal the full dimension of God's judgement and salvation. His ministry began in 740 BC, so he was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah. Like several other prophets, Isaiah lived in politically stormy times. The Assyrian Empire was expanding, and Israel was in decline. We know certain things about him. He was a married man with two sons, who spent most of his life in Jerusalem. Tradition also tells us he died when he was sawed in half during the reign of Manasseh.

Our reading for today comes from the sixth chapter of Isaiah. It is a vision. The great prophet is experiencing God Himself. 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. God's robe filled 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. It is one of the great moments in his life. This is where the text begins to speak to us. One of the primary reasons we come to church is to experience God. If you would like to experience God first hand, say, **"Amen!"**

Recently, the Pew Research Group asked 4,729 worshipping Americans why they attend church regularly. In our world, if you worship once a month, you are considered a regular worshipper. In the past, we considered anyone who only missed one Sunday a month a regular worshipper. Each person was permitted to answer more than once. This is what those regular worshippers said:

- To please their family, spouse or partner (16%)
- To meet new people (19%)
- They feel obligated to go (31%)
- To continue their family's religious tradition (37%)
- To be part of a faith community (57%)
- They find the sermons valuable (59%)
- For comfort in times of troubles or sorrow (66%)
- To become a better person (68%)

So their children will have a moral foundation (69%)  
To become closer to God (81%)

Do you understand what I just reported? 81% of regular worshippers go to church because they want to experience God. That figure is impressive.

Did you know that only 37% of Americans worship regularly? That means that 63% of Americans don't worship regularly. However, that does not mean they don't want to experience God. The same research group reported that non-worshippers don't worship because of practical or personal reasons. They cite a lack of time or a difference of opinion with church officials. Non-worshippers are also not worshipping because of theological reasons. They say they can experience God in other places. They are not wrong. You can experience God walking in the woods. You can experience God walking on the beach. You can experience God on a golf course. We believe God is omnipresent. That means God is everywhere. That is why both worshippers and non-worshippers are jealous of Isaiah. He experienced God, and we all want to experience God. Augustine (356-430) once said, *"Because God has made us for Himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him."* If you hunger to experience God, say, **"Amen!"** However, our best opportunity to experience God is worshipping in church. As the spiritual leader of this church, I want to say this clearly. If you do not experience God in worship, then I have failed. This is painfully obvious: Church attendance does not guarantee a "God experience."

History tells us the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) worshipped regularly, but he was not loved by everyone. His enemies noticed he failed to kneel at the appropriate moment during one worship service. 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 really come to church for one reason. We come to church to experience God! Nothing else really matters.

Have you ever noticed how many distractions exist within the life of the church? I am convinced Satan uses those distractions so that we won't experience God. In other words, Satan promotes secondary things in the life of the church to a primary position. They are not always bad things; they can be good things. But they are not the best thing: God! Have you ever been so preoccupied during worship about some secondary thing within the life of the church that you didn't experience God? The temperature is too low, or too high. The sound system is too loud, or too soft. 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. The preacher 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? You have come to church for one reason, to experience God! Have you experienced God yet

today? When was the last time you experienced God at church? Let me ask you a deeper question.

Have you ever been burned out? Within the life of the church there is a 90/10 rule. I have spoken of it in the past. It says 90% of the work within the life of the church is done by 10% of the people. You must determine whether you are part of the 90% or the 10%. If you are part of the 90% who do next to nothing, let me ask you to do something. Something is better than nothing. If you are part of the 10%, let me warn you to be careful. Maybe this is your story: You got involved in the church because you wanted to experience God. However, you also wanted to do your part. You rolled up your sleeves and went to work. You taught Sunday school. You sang in the choir. You went to every work day and worked every dinner. You have a church key in your pocket. You have served on every committee three times. There is a dangerous side to volunteering at church. It will blind you from why you went to church in the first place. All you wanted to do was experience God! Can I ask you a question? Have you ever gone to church and never even thought about God, because there was work to do? I am not telling you to quit all your jobs. This church runs on volunteers. I am warning you to protect yourself. Church burnout is a reality. I have seen it hundreds of times. The reason you came to church today was to experience God. If you are not experiencing God, then there is something truly wrong.

My first United Methodist appointment in the East Ohio Annual Conference was the Morristown Charge in the old Saint Clairsville District. My charge consisted of three small membership congregations, Morristown, Lloydsville and Bannock. I would preach at Morristown at 9:30. I would preach at Lloydsville, where I lived, at 10:30 and I would preach at Bannock at 11:30. It was an eighteen-mile loop to cover all the churches. I always thought it was unique that the three churches didn't know one another. Like many small membership churches, Morristown and Bannock were dominated by a single extended family.

At the Lloydsville Church, the church was dominated by one person. His name was Wayne Rinkes. However, no one called him Wayne, everyone called him "Dub." Honestly, he was a great guy. There is no other way to say it. Dub Rinkes did everything at that church. He was the person who unlocked the door early on Sunday morning, and he locked the door early in the afternoon. He taught Sunday school and read the scripture during worship. He was the guy who mowed the lawn in the summer, and he was the one who shoveled the snow in the winter. He was the one who painted the sanctuary, and he was the head chef at the community dinners. He was the most generous person when the plate was passed, and he was the one who handed me my monthly \$375 paycheck, because he was also the church's treasurer. He did everything in the life of that church for one reason. He loved his mother. He promised his mother on her deathbed that he would not let the church close during his lifetime. He was a good man and a good son. He worked hard to keep the Lloydsville United Methodist Church open. However, Dub was not a young man. One day he pulled me to the side and told me he needed knee surgery. He needed my help to find people to do his church jobs. I did, and

Dub promised me he would return in a few weeks. Dub's surgery was more complex than expected and his knee got infected. Dub's several weeks away turned into several months. I kept up with Dub during his absence. I visited him or called him regularly. I would always ask him the same question, when are you coming back? One day, I noticed Dub was healthy. That made me wonder. My question changed from, "When are you coming back to church," to "Are you coming back to church?" He just smiled and said, "Russ, I want to be honest with you. I feel liberated. I loved my mother, but she is gone. I'm not coming back to church because I don't want all those jobs. The church seems to be doing fine without me, and I'm doing better without the church." Then, came the painful words no minister wants to hear. "It is not you, but I'm attending another church. I just want to go to church and worship God." Dub Rinkes never did return to the Loydsville United Methodist because we had burned him out.

I hope that is not your story. If you aren't experiencing God at church, then you really haven't been to church. Do you remember the quote from Augustine? He once said, *"Because God has made us for Himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**