

## Vertical: *Trembling in the Temple*

Biblical Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

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### I wonder. Has anything truly “astounded” or “amazed” you lately?

Seriously. We live in a world of 24-hour news cycles, instant information, and technological advancement. Our smart phones can do what used to be accomplished by supercomputers, recording studios, web developers, and Hollywood special effects experts. We are pretty hard to amaze.

And even if something does happen to penetrate our media-immersed lives, so that we text or call to say “OMG!” – *do I need to add that’s short for “Oh my God?”* - our amazement has a short shelf life. Let me illustrate.

In July we celebrated 237 years of independence from King George III, but now people are all “wiggly” over the birth of a royal baby named “little George.” That’s strange. But by next week it will be so *“five minutes ago.”*

We are rarely amazed for very long! Our excitement at the latest movie, or sporting event or newest song fades fast. And all we are left with is *“meh!”*

As a culture, we remind me of my eleven-year-old granddaughter. She joined us in rural Ontario for vacation, and was delighted the camp had Wi-Fi, satellite TV, and a pool and hot tub. She was just a little irritated that her dad wouldn’t pay the roaming fees so she could text her friends.

I suggested she come along on the pontoon for our first day of fishing. **Big mistake.** Twelve square miles of pristine natural lake beauty, bald eagles and loons, walleye, perch and northern pike – it all seemed like heaven to me - but not to her. She tried fishing for about five minutes - and made it impossible for anyone else to do so. She is hard to amaze and easily bored!

And the very last place we expect to be amazed is Church! We may know the words to *“Amazing Grace,”* but to be honest, we are rarely amazed, either by grace or by God. Worship comes and worship goes - and so do we.

**But we are created for more!** Maybe that's why, against all odds and predictions of the demise of Church, we keep coming. We hunger for something more than we can create on our own. That something is a relationship with our Creator. For thousands of years, our Hebrew and Christian ancestors have gathered to worship in the Presence of God.

I told our Church leaders at a retreat yesterday, that I want to tell everyone who doesn't worship regularly or would just rather go to brunch on Sunday, *"It's no big deal. It's only the worship of God Almighty we're talking about!"*

You'll find a much more spiritual expression of that truth in Psalm 22:3-4: ***"You are holy, O God. You inhabit the praises of your people. In you our ancestors trusted. They cried out to you, and you delivered them."***

**God lives** in our worship. That's what this series, **"Vertical,"** is all about.

I know of no better Biblical passage about worshipping God than our text from Isaiah 6. As you open your Bibles, let me give you some background.

It was the year 642 B.C., the year King Uzziah died. It is one of the few times in the Bible where we can pinpoint an exact place and year when something amazing happened to one of God's people. And Isaiah was in the Temple.

It was a hard time. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria and was taken into captivity. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, was spared only because King Uzziah had traded prosperity for turning away from God.<sup>1</sup>

So Isaiah fell on his face in the temple, despairing for his people. And the presence of the Almighty overwhelmed him, in the sense of Rudolph Otto's *"Mysterium Tremendum,"*<sup>2</sup> and Isaiah was never the same. He says:

***"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting high upon the throne; and the doorposts shook on their foundations; and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. The angels called to another, saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'"***

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright in *A History of Israel*, 3rd edition, Westminster Press, Copyright ©1981.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. J.W. Harvey. Copyright © 1971, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

***“And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am undone; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’ But an angel touched my mouth with a brand from the altar saying: ‘Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is covered.’”***

***“And 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!’”***<sup>3</sup>

**What happened there?** The language may be ancient - what happened is unmistakable. This was not just a little added inspiration for Isaiah’s life - a nice, spiritual way to begin his week. This was life changing, awe-inspiring, breath taking, and amazing worship. And three things occurred for Isaiah.

**First, there was a sense of holy awe.**

He came to worship, in the midst of the challenges of his life and world, with a sense of awe and amazement at the power of God. He entered the Temple with a sense of humility in the presence of the Holy One. The joy and laughter and friendliness are part of what I love about Old Mission, but we should never forget that this is also the Temple of God Almighty!

**Second, there was a sense of sinfulness.**

Isaiah was a good man. We would consider him a Godly man when compared to others, including the King. Yet, when Isaiah caught a glimpse of God, he was keenly aware of his own unworthiness and sin. And as he acknowledged that, he experienced God’s forgiveness! We will experience God’s presence, as we admit our sin and claim God’s amazing grace!

**Third, there was a sense of responsibility.**

When Isaiah experienced the presence of God, he was preparing his heart and life to make a difference in the world. True worship prepares us to say yes to living for God. It is not just a personal spiritual “high” or just a feeling.

**The early Church fathers were very clear about this.** The only real test that Christianity has ever determined for testing the authenticity of a true experience of God’s presence - is that of a transformed life on the part of those who experienced God’s presence, and those influenced by them.

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from Isaiah 6:1-8. *New Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1996. Thomas Nelson: Nashville.

Worship is not about experiencing “inner peace” although that often is a byproduct. It about encountering the God whose love in the words of George Matheson’s hymn, *“will not let us go”* until we are changed by it.

Walter Brueggemann says of Isaiah’s experience in the Temple: *“There is no easy gospel here, no cheap grace, no good word that gives assurance to those who drop by hoping for a quick and comfortable deal.”*<sup>4</sup>

**There is only the unrelenting, powerful presence of God.** The one who loves us, overwhelms us, forgives us, and will not let us go until we surrender our will for God’s own, and our hearts and lives to God’s calling.

That’s what true worship is about. To use the language of this series, the impact of opening our lives to the presence of God is visible on the *“horizontal plane of history”* where we live. But the power comes from the *“vertical”* - from the Source - from spending time in the presence of God.

For centuries, an argument has been offered that it is more important to do the work of God than spend time worshipping God. In our time that gets expressed by people like Dan Kimball as *“They like Jesus but not the Church.”*

I like what H. Eddie Fox says: *“Asking whether worship or service is more important is ridiculous. That’s like asking which is more important, breathing in or breathing out – it depends on which you did last!”*

God has designed us for both the *vertical* and the *horizontal*, according to Jesus, *“to love God and love people.”* (Luke 12:29-31)

And when we **get** that, whenever and however it happens, it is amazing!

Bishop Will Willimon, when he was still Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, said after a worship service one Sunday, a young man came up and said, *“Dean Willimon, God spoke to me today during the service.”*

And Dr. Willimon said, *“Well, thank you, son. Now let me ask you. At just what point during my sermon did God speak to you?”*

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<sup>4</sup> [Isaiah](#) (Westminster Bible Companion) by Walter Brueggemann. Copyright © 1998, John Knox Press.

And the young man said, *“Oh, sorry, it really wasn’t during the sermon. It actually started during the announcements.”* Willimon sputtered, *“What?”*

*“Yes.”* the young man said, *“You were asking for volunteers to serve in a literacy project in downtown Durham. And God spoke to me, saying I could do that. And I thought I should tell you. I will lend a hand.”*

Dr. Willimon now says, *“That’s one of the best sermons I ever preached.”*  
Do you hear what he’s saying?

You never know when or how it’s going to happen. It might be a hymn or song, the scripture, sermon or prayer - or even the announcements. But when you spend time regularly in the Temple, God will get your attention.

**God’s holiness, and our worship, will lead us to our transformation.**

When we see God for who God is, we see ourselves for who we really are. And God heals and forgives us. And then we know what we need to do.

Long ago Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, *“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”* With lips still trembling he said, *“Here I am. Send me!”*<sup>5</sup>

And the voice of God is still calling whenever we truly worship...

Whom shall I send to tell others the good news of God’s grace?

***Here I am. Send me!***

Who will help me feed the hungry and make a difference for the poor?

***Here I am. Send me!***

Who will give their resources to touch the lives of children and families?

***Here I am. Send me!***

Who will build a Church where all people of all walks of life are welcome?

***Here I am. Send me!***

Whatever it takes, wherever you lead, with everything I am, and have...

***Here I am. Send me!***

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:1-8. New International Version.