



The Only Two Styles of Worship
A Sermon for Northminster Church
By Zachary Helton
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Isaiah 1:10-18

Listen to the command of YHWH, you people of “Gomorrah”:

“These interminable sacrifices of yours: what are they to me?” says YHWH. “I am fed up with burnt offerings of rams and the fat of calves! The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats nauseates me.

“When you came to present yourselves before me, who asked you to trample over my courts? Don’t bring any more of your useless offerings to me — their incense fills me with loathing. New moons, Sabbaths, assemblies— I cannot endure another festival of injustice! Your new moons and your pilgrimages I despise with all my soul. They are wearisome to me; I am tired of bearing them.

“When you open up your hands in prayer, I turn my eyes away from you. You may heap prayer upon prayer, but I won’t hear them— your hands are covered with blood! Wash! Clean yourselves! Get your injustice out of my sight! Cease to do evil and learn to do good! Search for justice and help the oppressed! Protect those who are orphaned and plead the case of those who are widowed!

“Come now! Let’s look at the choices before you,” says YHWH. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they can be white as snow. Though they are red as crimson, they can be like fleece.”

Matthew 5:23-24; 6:1, 5-6; 7:21-23, 28-29

“Beware of practicing your piety before others to attract their attention; if you do this, you will have no reward from your Abba God in heaven.

“And when you pray, don’t behave like the hypocrites; they love to pray standing up in the synagogues and on street corners for people to see them. The truth is, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to God who is in that secret place, and your Abba God—who sees all that is done in secret—will reward you.

“It isn’t those who cry out, ‘My Savior! My Savior!’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven; rather, it is those who do the will of Abba God in heaven. When that day comes, many will plead with me, ‘Savior! Savior! Have we not prophesied in your name? Have we not exorcised demons in your name? Didn’t we do many miracles in your name as well?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!’

Jesus finished speaking and left the crowds spellbound at his teaching, because he taught with an authority that was unlike their religious scholars.

Before moving to Monroe, Claire and I worked in Waco, TX for several years, which is home to Baylor University. Every year in late August, right before the beginning of the fall semester, just about every church in town would gather on Baylor’s quad for an event publicly referred to as “The Celebration of Community and Faith.” Although, privately, we all just called it “the church fair.” You know, you have job fairs, student activity fairs, and, in the private Christian university bubble, the church fair. Every church would get their own table (in varying degrees of shade or August sun depending on who you knew in the Spiritual Life Department), they’d spread out their publicity materials, tchotchkes, and attention-grabbers like a comic-con for Jesus, and then ministers and volunteers would stand around their space and try to convince students to give their church a chance. At least, most ministers did that. I mostly asked students what they were looking for, and in most cases, told them they’d be much more comfortable somewhere else.

You couldn’t be there for long without catching on that students would start conversations in one of two ways. First, there was the oh-so-vague “Tell me about your church” (which was often code for *is there a singles ministry that can help me out?*) and second, there

was the oh-so-loaded “What is worship like at your church?” As far as most students were concerned, pretty much everything they felt they needed to know about a church could be found in the answer to that second question. Do you do “traditional worship?” Do you use an organ and sing those same, boring hymns every week with their “thine”s and “thou”s, climaxing with a three-point sermon, altar call, and five reps of *Just as I Am*? Or do you do “contemporary worship?” Are there guitars and drum sets and songs with the same three lyrics on repeat with a stream of consciousness sermon in there somewhere? Are you charismatic, waving your hands in the air like crazy people? Or liturgical, with your rote genuflects and signs of the cross? The entire life of a church would be condescendingly reduced to that one question: What is worship like at your church? Are you like me, or should I be suspicious?

A friend of mine, a worship pastor with a distaste for reductive dualism, would always intentionally buck this question, like the kid that would throw dynamite in a rock, paper, scissors game. “What is worship like at *your* church?” they would ask, and he would respond with great pleasure, “Let’s call it ancient-future. We tell the ancient story of God so that we can faithfully live into God’s story in the present.” I always imagined this met with a few blinks and a “but do you use guitars or...?”

You can hear not-so-subtle implication: The question you’re asking... it’s the wrong question. Shouldn’t we be talking about *what* we are worshipping? How about whether our worship challenges us to transcend our *selves* and find out who we are in God’s story? Or does it help us cling just a little harder to our small, fearful, and self-justifying ego stories? What fruit does it produce – self-satisfaction or social justice? What is worship like at *your* church?

Around three thousand years ago, these were the questions Isaiah asked the worshippers of Judah. Or maybe it would be better to say these were questions he knew the answer to, and demanded better.

“Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!” he starts with a bit of a bang. “Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” You can almost hear them pushing back, after all, they were a people of Divine favor, not Divine judgment. “Oh really?” Isaiah shoots back, “because the fruit you bear, the way you treat the most vulnerable among you... it doesn’t seem to be much different, does it? God asks: What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, what’s the point? Enough with the burnt offerings – what was once such a pleasing aroma of gratitude and commitment is now a nauseating stench of thoughtlessness and mendacity. Did you think it was the blood of rams, bulls, lambs, and goats that made me

happy? You thought they were, what, a way to buy me off? I asked for your hearts and your hands, not your livestock.

You think coming into my Temple is an act of devotion? You'd be better off staying home. Trample my courts no more.

"Your songs and your prayers are to me no more than a clanging gong and a clashing cymbal. Your services and meetings, festivals and conferences, I find them tedious and boring. You think this is what I want?

"You stretch out your hands and say 'Lord, Lord' but you don't know me at all! You're not talking to me! So, get your hands out of my face, they are covered in blood." Again, you can hear them push back, saying of course they are covered in blood, it's the blood of the sacrifices you asked for! But again, you can hear God shoot back – "No, you may deceive yourselves, but I will not be deceived. Your hands are covered in the blood of the people, of the poor you trample, the widow and orphan you leave to die on the streets, the immigrant you exploit and send to prison for your own gain.

"You want to know what I want, the kind of worship I find acceptable? Wash that blood from your hands, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow, care for my children that have fallen through the cracks, and then, only then, when your worship bears the fruit of love and justice will you be worshipping *me*, YHWH, the Living God."

Thus, saith the Lord.

In my last couple of sermons, I've observed that of the thousands of religions identified on our planet, there really seem to be only two. There is religion that roots us more firmly in ego, and religion that liberates us to fall into the Spirit of Love. Today the prophet Isaiah points out that both of their religions have their own style of worship. Whatever form it takes, whatever language it uses, whether it uses ancient liturgies, bells, organs, stage lights, or guitars, there are really only two kinds of worship: **Worship can be a tool for meeting the needs of the self, or a participatory drama that wakes us up to God's Spirit.** In the hope of seeing our own practice more clearly, let us consider the two.

First, there is egoic religion, which is eager to put everything, from scripture to mission to worship into the service of the flesh, the false self. By that I mean the scripts we are running in our head, in which we are at the center and the whole world is categorized around us into

good / bad, like / dislike, safe / unsafe, and while this story may have helped us grow and survive, much of it is no longer necessary, and certainly should not be in the driver's seat of our lives. It bears the fruit of fear, tribalism, indulgence, and is eager to put everything into its service. Worship is no different. **In the hands of the ego, worship becomes a tool for meeting the imagined needs of the self.**

Let's imagine for a moment that we're contemporaries of Isaiah, worshippers in ancient Judah. At the appointed times you wake up, gather your things, including the best of your livestock, and make the trip to the Temple in Jerusalem. You say your long prayers, sing your psalms, and offer your sacrifice at the altar, and as you watch the smoke from your burnt offering rise from the altar to the heavens you feel... what exactly? This is where each of our false selves will put worship to work trying to meet some imagined need.

To one person, watching the smoke rise or singing their psalms, they may feel they've earned God's forgiveness and that maybe they won't feel so guilty all the time.

To another, they may feel they've done their part for God and earned some kind of blessing from God. Maybe things will go better this week.

To yet another, the rituals might kindle a sense of self-assurance – certainty that yes *God is* on my side and *I am* on the right team, and it's okay for me to go obliterate my enemies.

Perhaps to someone else, the act achieves a kind of spiritual high that will take them until the next worship experience – like they've gotten closer to that exciting Divine reality and meaning they feel so separate from, that their gray life is, for just a little while, infused with meaning and possibility.

Or maybe it's just a habit. It's the way things are, what we are supposed to do, and to mess with that status quo is to invite unnecessary discomfort that we just don't need right now.

None of these ego-needs will actually be met through worship, not for very long anyway, but like an addict they return to their illusory, temporal drug of choice week after week, season after season. We may as well call this "worship abuse," and is it really so different from the reasons modern worshippers might drag themselves out of bed on a Sunday morning? Is it really that different from the needs worshippers hope will be met in that church, synagogue, temple, or whatever they call their gathering place? The liturgy, the music, whatever it is, is put to work trying to satiate the never-satisfied hunger of the ego for intimate connection to the Divine.

What we really bow down to in this mode of worship is not the Living God, but to our *self* and its fears and desires – fears and desires that can truly only ever be addressed by dying to the self, not indulging it. We dress up the flesh in divine clothing, bowing down to it as if it were what God wanted, managing all the while to hide safely from any Eternal Truth.

It is as a wise person[1] once wrote, “In the beginning, God created humanity in God’s own image, and humanity has been trying to return the favor ever since.” When we bow down to the self, when we reinforce those desires, baptizing them in the name of God, we commit and idolatry that locks us firmly in our own, small, painful stories, producing the fruits of Sodom and Gomorrah, enmity, anger, fights, oppression, and indulgence. This worship drives us deeper into the illusion of our separateness from one another and from God. **In the hands of the ego, worship becomes no more than a tool for meeting the imagined needs of the self.**

But then there is that other religion, that framework that guides us in dying to ourselves, liberating us from the small stories and scripts, the fears and hungers of the ego, so that we might be born again to new life, and the Spirit of Love might live fully through us. The goal of this religion is Christlikeness, and in the service of this tradition **worship points beyond itself to the ever-unfolding story of God.**

Isaiah sees a congregation entering the Temple, engaging in worship, and walking back out into the world unchanged. When Isaiah looks at their worship, he sees the emptiness of the rituals and symbols, and tries to shake them out of their pattern. “Do you think we sacrifice animals because God just like animal sacrifice? No! It is to put us into a posture of gratitude and humility before the grandeur of God’s earth! Do you think we sing to God because God just like the entertainment? No! We sing so that knowledge of God’s character can be woven into the deepest parts of ourselves, the parts only music can reach! Do you think we wash our hands because God told us to and we just need to do what God says to keep God happy? No! We wash our hands because it’s a symbol of new life – cleanliness and renewal through God’s grace! Each of these elements point beyond themselves to a deeper, truer Reality. This is what God wants – worship that moves us beyond ourselves and into God, worship that produces the fruits of love and justice!

I heard a story once of a mother trying to teach her children to make pot roast as her mother had taught her. She walked them through the steps, one of which was to cut off just a

half inch or so of meat from either end of the roast before putting it in the pan. “But, why do you cut off the ends?” one child asked. “It seems like a waste of meat.”

The mother was momentarily gripped by a fear that her child would abandon this tradition that meant so much to her, a tradition she associated with family gatherings and mutual care, and so she responded by rebuking them. “This is just the way our family does it. Trust me.”

Well, that night, after her children went to sleep, their question kept pestering her, so she called her mother to ask her about it. “Oh dear,” her mother replied with a laugh, “I always cut the ends off because our pan wasn’t big enough for the whole roast to fit!”

Worship, separated from a purpose beyond itself, becomes no more than a vessel for the ego to fill.

In the tradition of Isaiah, Jesus teaches the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. He takes elements of worship and reclaims them from the ego-script. “Are you offering a gift at the altar, while fostering anger in your heart as if one reality shouldn’t touch the other one? Forget it! Leave your sacrifice, because it won’t mean anything at all unless you first take the work of abandoning yourself to God’s Spirit seriously.”

“Are you worshipping so that other people will see you and think you’re righteous? That isn’t what this is for at all. It isn’t those that go to worship and sing ‘Lord, Lord!’ that will experience the Kingdom, but those who actually do the will of God. When it all comes crashing down and they see what God, Being, Love really is, they’ll realize that in all their churchgoing, in all of the Bible studies and choir practices they’ve never actually met God before, they were only keeping company with themselves.”

Worship is, at its best, the practice of dramatically reenacting the story of God, a story we can all participate and lose ourselves in. We get caught up in this story and bow down before the Spirit of Love beyond our *selves*.

Consider our own liturgy, for example. The preludes, the call to worship, the procession and hymns, the prayer, the readings, the sermon, the anthem, communion, the invitation, the response. Together, they tell a story that serves to symbolize the story of God as it plays out in a thousand ways every day.

In the preludes and call to worship, the invitation is issued, as everything calls us to awaken to God’s presence. Some answer the call, proceeding forward to pay closer attention. In the prayers, we confess how we have lived and awaken to see ourselves as God sees us. With

these clear lenses, we listen for a word from God in the readings, playing with it and considering it in the sermon and anthem. It all culminates as we *behold what we are*– the body and blood of Christ, and *become what we receive* – taking that life and grace into ourselves. Then we are invited to respond, to take that Word and allow it to become flesh, our flesh, in this world. We respond by loving ourselves and the world with the Spirit we’ve inherited from God. And we’re not just watching a priest perform these holy acts, but it’s participatory. We call and respond, we sing, and we eat, because we’re all participants in this great drama that awakens us to the grand story of God. *That* is worship, and the fruit of that worship is always a deep compassion for ourselves and our world. It moves us to care for one another, not out of guilt, but out of awareness that we are all One in God. **Worship should point beyond itself to the ever-unfolding story of God.**

While I was in the middle of it, that church fair scene seemed so normal. Its only when I’ve tried to describe it to others that I’ve found myself saying, “I know, it’s weird.” But really, the longer I sit with it, the more it seems like the perfect microcosm of church in the Bible Belt. “What’s worship like at *your* church?” we ask, hopping around and looking for something that best suits our tastes, that feels most harmonious to our ego, totally unaware that the question we’re asking is the wrong one. Whatever form it takes, whatever instruments or liturgies it uses, it’s only as good as its ability to help us enter that unfolding, ancient, brand new cosmic story – its ability to help us be formed more fully into the likeness of Christ. **Worship can be a tool for meeting the needs of the self, or a participatory drama that wakes us up to God’s Spirit.**

Northminster family, may we be a people who ask the right question. May we be a people who see through the ego-games we’re so apt to play, and may we truly worship God together in Spirit and in truth. Amen.