

Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a community of ducks waddling off to duck church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go, there was no God-given task the ducks could not accomplish. With those wings they could soar into the presence of God himself. Shouts of "Amen" were quacked throughout the duck congregation. At the conclusion of the service, the ducks left, commenting on what a wonderful message they had heard -- and waddled back home.

Too often these days, would-be worshipers attending church waddle away from worship as they waddled in -- unchallenged and unchanged. Perhaps it is because we are creatures of habit. Week after week, congregants generally sit in the same place in the same pew, following an order of service that they know by heart, listening to a sermon which they assume is intended primarily for someone else.

Occasionally, though, something happens. A serendipity type moment that is unplanned, unrehearsed, and uncontrollable. In the midst of a worship service, worship happens. Someone's eyes are opened to a deeper awareness of the grandeur of God by the majesty of the music, and a new commitment is born. Someone recognizes his or her life's story as the Scripture lesson is read, and a

new believer is born. Someone hears in the sermon, as if for the first time, the forgiving love of Jesus, and a new hope is born. We may wonder why such happenings occur there but not here, to this person but not to that one. But experience has taught us that these events can't be explained, only described.

In fact, the central character in this week's first lesson is Isaiah, whose call to prophetic service came during an annual celebration of worship. It was for him an encounter with God so profound that afterward he could no longer see himself, or his people, in quite the same way. To Isaiah it seemed that the entire building shook with the presence of God. But have you ever wondered about the others who were present during that same worship service? Did they have a similar experience to Isaiah's? Did this act of worship affect how they viewed themselves? How they viewed God? How is it that two persons can hear the same music, the same prayers, the same sermon, and one of them be utterly transformed by the experience, while the other is unmoved?

The answer appears in a moment Isaiah describes in today's text, a moment when; as songs are being sung, and prayers are being prayed, and the high priest is declaring the greatness of God, unexpectedly, worship happens. It happens to him. And although each of us may yearn for our own worship-filled moment, let us listen to Isaiah's account of an encounter with God when worship happened.

Worship happens whenever God is radically present. Whenever we experience an event, or a moment that transcends the ordinary, one that is monumentally and ginormously different from other events or experiences of its kind. And therefore, to speak of God as radically present is not to deny that he is always everywhere present, but rather to describe those occasions when the reality of God's presence bursts upon an individual's consciousness in an unusually powerful way.

The radical presence of God cannot be controlled or programmed; it can only be experienced. But that experience can come to us anywhere, anytime. For Isaiah it happened in the temple, but God does not limit holy moments to holy places. For Moses God's radical presence was discovered on the backside of a wilderness; for Elijah it was in a mountain hideout; for Saul it was on a bounty-hunting excursion to Damascus. And who would have thought that the most radical presence of God imaginable, the Incarnation, would have begun among the distinctive smells of a barn filled with animals and ended among the death throes of criminals?

Isaiah's experience reminds us that the radical presence of God is found not only in the extraordinary, but in the ordinary as well. God can be as profoundly present in the sunset over a mountain peak as he is in a church or

cathedral. He can reveal himself in a concert hall as vitally as he might in a moment of prayer. More important than where we are, is our willingness to see God in what is going on around us.

Isaiah was engaged in an ordinary service of worship, seeing what everyone else was seeing, hearing what everyone else was hearing, when God broke through the ordinary to reveal himself as radically present. Isaiah "saw through" the smoke and the haze of the Enthronement Celebration to the eternal reality which the ceremony represented. He was not content to experience only worship; he was open to an experience of God. Similarly, we, too, are more apt to be surprised by the radical presence of God when our hearts are opened to seeing him in the ordinary events of life.

Such awareness, however, is made difficult for us because we are part of a society which celebrates the sensational and the spectacular. If an event is not filled with more glitz and glamour, and flamboyant hype than what came before it, then, for many, it is a non-event. Nowhere is this seen more clearly, perhaps, than in Hollywood, where each succeeding production has to have more and better pyrotechnics and special effects than its predecessor.

This attitude can easily infect the church as well. It is reflected in our architecture, in our church programs, and in our annual celebrations. And sadly,

we are consciously or unconsciously educating an entire generation of believers that God is to be experienced only in the ornate and spectacular. Overlooked is the possibility that in the ordinary, God can be radically present, and worship can happen.

Worship happens whenever human inadequacy is met by the grace of God. The radical presence of God caused Isaiah to recognize, perhaps for the first time, the spiritual shortcomings of himself and his fellow Jews. Under King Uzziah, the nation of Judah had experienced an almost unprecedented period of peace and prosperity. Life was good, the economy was robust, the polls showed high consumer confidence, and all of the economic indicators pointed to more of the same. What is more, all of this had been accomplished through human effort and ingenuity.

Is it any wonder then that Isaiah's message fell on deaf ears? Who wants to listen to a nay-sayer rain dire predictions on a good-time parade? Perhaps that is why we, too, have such ineffective worship experiences. We are content with life, with our careers, with our family. We have settled into a comfortable, if not totally satisfactory, routine of living. To be sure, we need God, but only to clean up around the edges of life. We certainly don't need his radical presence that might reveal the inadequacies of our carefully planned out existence. And

worship is fine, as long as it helps us feel good about who we are, and what we have accomplished.

One can imagine the spiritual satisfaction of Isaiah and his fellow priests as they believed they had captured the essence of God in their religious ceremony. However, as Isaiah was soon to learn, when one confronts the radical presence of God, all claims to wisdom, goodness, and self-sufficiency melt away, and one is left wishing for a pair of seraph wings to hide the nakedness. Isn't that, also, the message of the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector? The one who stands to claim special privilege based on education, religious orthodoxy, and pious behavior ends up talking to himself, while the other is met by the radical presence of God because he knows that in the presence of the Holy, God's mercy is one's only hope.

However, God does not reveal his radical presence simply to overwhelm us, or to make us feel worthless. Rather, he wishes by His presence to remind us of his empowering grace that meets and transforms our own feelings of inadequacy. No sooner had Isaiah confessed his own uncleanness, that God impressed on him the grace that forgives sins. Indeed, in today's story, we are led to understand that only because Isaiah was able to confess his inadequacy

before God was God able to use him as a prophet to the people. For Isaiah, when human inadequacy was met by divine grace, worship happened.

Worship happens whenever a grateful response answers a divine call. It is important to note that God's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" was not directed to Isaiah, but rather to the attending seraphim. Isaiah simply overheard the question and immediately stepped forward. One might want to question his sanity. After all, God did not say where the "whom" was being sent, or what the task was. Isaiah might have waited until more information was forthcoming before he volunteered.

And what could have prompted such a seemingly rash response?

Gratitude! Gratitude for God's grace. Gratitude for God's forgiveness of sin. Gratitude for the experience of God's presence unlike anything he had known before. In fact, you might even say that an attitude of gratitude should lead us to some type of positive action, which is an appropriate response to God's actions in the lives of his people, and in that expression of gratitude, worship happens.

A pastor and social activist named Tony Campolo tells the story of a young woman named Nancy who gratefully responded to God's movement of grace in her life. Although Nancy is handicapped and confined to a wheelchair, she has an extraordinary ministry. Every week, in the personals section of her

local newspaper, she runs an ad that reads, "If you are lonely or have a problem, call me. I am in a wheelchair and I seldom get out. We can share our problems with each other. I'd love to talk." She spends much of her day on the telephone talking with more than 30 lonely and discouraged people who call her each week.

When Campolo asked how she came to be confined to a wheelchair, Nancy revealed that she had tried to commit suicide by jumping from the balcony of her apartment. Instead of dying, however, she ended up in a hospital room paralyzed from the waist down. One night in the hospital, she said, Jesus came to her and very clearly said, "You have had a healthy body and a crippled soul. From this day on you will have a crippled body, but you will have a healthy soul." She said, "I gave my life to Jesus that night in that hospital room, and I knew that if I kept a healthy soul, it would mean that I would have to help other people. And so I do."

No one who has ever been touched by God can remain still. No one who has experienced the grace of God can or should remain silent. No one who hears in their heart the divine call for service can do anything less than respond with gratitude, "Here am I; send me!" And in moments like that, worship happens. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.