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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, May 2, 2010

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

The Heart of Worship

1 Kings 8:1-14; 9:1-9

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You and I need a God who is bigger than we are. That is the heart of worship.

Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample have made a practice of visiting elementary schools and asking children to write letters to God. They've published some of those letters in a book titled, *Children's Letters to God*. Here's a sampling:

1. Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair. Sylvia.
2. Dear God, your book has a lot of zip to it. I like science fiction stories. You had some very good ideas and I would like to know where you found them. Your reader, Jimmy.
3. Dear God, what is it like when you die? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know. I don't want to do it. Mike.
4. Dear God, my teacher read us the part where all the Jews went through where the water was and got away. Keep up the good work. I am Jewish. Love, Paula.
5. Dear God, we are going on vacation for two weeks Friday so we won't be in church. I hope you will be there when we get back. When do you take your vacation? Good-bye, Donnie.

What makes these letters funny, of course, is that the children view God through human characteristics and experiences.

Certainly, the Bible teaches us that we are to come to God as children, that is with an authentic trust that God is fully worthy of our dependence on him. The letters cited above are funny and I do love children, but may I suggest that in our attempt to make God relevant to our times and to our needs, we have made God irrelevant.

Have we made God in our image? Perhaps we have made worship too accessible when worship is really not accessible except in the Spirit. Perhaps we have made God so personal, intimate and approachable that we've created an inadequate image of the Creator. Like the children, perhaps we've endowed God with so many human characteristics that there's not enough "Godness" left in our understanding of him. You and I need a God who is

bigger than we are. That is the heart of worship.

All the people gathered in Jerusalem during the seventh month for the Feast of Booths. The Feast of Booths is the third of the festivals. It is the commemoration of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It is also time for the people to renew God's covenant with them by the reading of the Law given to Moses. The festival lasted seven days. Under King Solomon, the people of Israel had finally been able to build a great temple as the house of God.

Our readings in 1 Kings 8 and 9 tell us about the day that the priests brought the Ark of the Covenant into the special inner sanctum of the temple and God's appearance to Solomon. First, in chapter 8 after depositing the Ark in the temple, the priests came out, and as they did, a cloud, symbolizing the glory of God, filled the temple. The cloud was so dark that the priests could not see well enough to carry out their duties inside. Solomon was referencing Psalm 97:2, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness." Thick darkness, to signify God's presence, seems to be a way of saying that a primary characteristic of God is mystery; it speaks to God's holiness. Second, in chapter 9 God spoke a promise to Solomon that his eyes would always be fixed on the newly dedicated temple; forever and for all time. God then followed that with a conditional promise that if Solomon obeyed him as established in the pattern given to David, that is to obey God's commands, the Law and walk in his ways, then the promise of continual rule of a firmly established kingdom would be of no surprise. But, if Solomon and his descendants disobeyed then Israel would pay for her sins and share in the guilt of her kings.

At the heart of worship is mystery, the holiness of God. Isaiah's experience of God was such that he records this about God's holiness, signifying the sharp contrast between the Creator and ourselves: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Or take Isaiah 6:1-4.

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. 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. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

I note two distinctive characteristics of God's holiness. First, God is *alive*. Uzziah is dead, but God lives on. "From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Ps. 90:2). God was the living God when this universe spoken into

existence. He was the living God when Socrates drank his poison. He was the living God when William Bradford governed Plymouth Colony. He was the living God in 1966 when Thomas Altizer proclaimed him dead and *Time* magazine put it on the front cover. God never had a beginning and therefore depends on nothing for his existence. He always has been and always will be *alive*. Second, God is *omnipotent*. The throne of his authority is not one among many. It is high and lifted up. That God's throne is higher than every other throne signifies God's superior power to exercise his authority. No opposing authority can nullify the decrees of God. What he purposes, he accomplishes. To be gripped by the omnipotence (or sovereignty) of God is marvelous because he is for us. The sovereign authority of the living God is a refuge full of joy and power for those who keep his covenant.

God is holy. The possibilities of language to carry the meaning of God eventually run out. The word "holiness" carries us just so far. God's holiness is beyond words. The root meaning of holy is to cut or separate. A *holy thing* is cut off and separated from common use. Earthly things and persons are holy as they are distinct from the world and devoted to God. So the Bible speaks of holy ground (Exodus 3:5), holy assemblies (Exodus 12:16), a holy nation (Exodus 19:6); a holy city (Nehemiah 11:1), holy promises (Psalm 105:42), holy men (2 Peter 1:21) and women (1 Peter 3:5), holy scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15), a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) and a holy faith (Jude 20). Almost anything can become holy if it is separated from the common and devoted to God. But God did not become holy. He has always been holy. We become holy or set apart when according to Ephesians 5:15-20, we are careful how we live; filled with the Spirit; make music in our hearts; and give thanks to God the Father for everything. Moreover, we are holy and set apart as the apostle John reminds us in John 4:21-24 that "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

The very holiness of God means that he is separate from all that is not God. There is an infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature. God is one of a kind. God is in a class by himself. To whom is God devoted so as to derive his holiness? To no one but himself. God is the absolute reality beyond which is only more of God. His being and his character are utterly undetermined by anything outside himself. He is not holy because he keeps the rules. He wrote the rules! God is not holy because he keeps the law. The law is holy because it reveals God. God is absolute. In the end God is holy in that he is God and not man. God's holiness is what he is as God which no one else is or ever will be.

To speak of the mystery of God, his holiness, is to say that God is reality apart from human reality. God is not just man with a few superlatives added. God is not the culmination of all that is good in human beings. God is

something totally other than we are.

Now to acknowledge God as mystery or as holy is not to say that we cannot know anything about God. Actually we can know whatever God has chosen to reveal to us about himself; through the Bible, Jesus Christ and even personal experience.

If we accept mystery, God's holiness as a primary part of how we are to view God, then we must ask, "So what?"

So what? We don't have God all figured out. A God defined is a God finished. If my mind could grasp all that God is, then he would be not much more than I am. Fortunately, that is not the case.

You and I need a God who is bigger than we are and that's just what the passages in 1 Kings 8 and 9 tell us. God is reality wholly other than we are. We must not forget that. God is not bound by our limits or stymied by the barriers that confine us. He's bigger than we are or can even conceive of. You and I need a God who is bigger than we are. That is the heart of worship.

When Solomon brought the Ark of the Covenant into the temple, the glory of God filled the place as a thick cloud. The holy God was present, although mysteriously. Yes, the people sung psalms and read the Law. Perhaps they even had announcements. But when they came to the temple, they came to be in the presence of the holy God; the One who was wholly and holy other.

Is that why we come to worship? You and I need a God who is bigger than we are. We do not need a God made in our image. And yet I believe we have come dangerously close if not already crossed the line to make God in our image. Worship is not about the music, the liturgy, the sermon, the take away points, the prayers, the instrumentation, the loudness or softness of music or even the temperature of the room. Worship is about being in the presence of the holy God; the One who is wholly and holy other.

You and I need a God who is bigger than we are. That is the heart of worship. As followers of Jesus, we worship a God who is wholly and holy other. Let us pray.

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