

THE WAYS PEOPLE UNDERSTAND GOD

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

June 23, 2024

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

This morning's text from Isaiah is indeed an extraordinary one because in it we find the prophet Isaiah's answer to one of the questions we all struggle with as we think about God. What is that question? Simple! What is God like? This is a real and quite genuine question for most of us, although too often it gets pushed deep down in our psyches as we are told over and over again that God is God and physical appearance is not something we are supposed to worry about or get hung up on. In fact, the second commandment is quite clear in naming even the attempt to create an image of God as one of the most serious of sins! But even that does not keep us from wondering about God – God's appearance, God's nature, and, of course, what it means to us to attempt to be in relationship with this divine being, the divine life force, the higher power – however we think about God.

The Old Testament is filled with stories about various biblical characters wondering about the nature of God. We learn in these texts that God has no immediately discernible form, even though Genesis tells us we are made in God's image. Then we encounter all kinds of texts offering a continually mixed message with stories of this undiscernible God walking in the Garden of Eden and not finding Adam and Eve (I thought God was all-knowing – how could God not know where they were?) And what about the burning bush story? God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, but God was not the burning bush. God spoke to Moses on the mountaintop when God was about to give Moses the Ten Commandments, written on stone by God's own finger. Yet God remains invisible even though Moses was ordered to take off his sandals because he was standing on Holy Ground in God's invisible presence. One of the most fascinating stories about Moses

and God comes after the people have been given the Ten Commandments but are now wandering through the desert for 40 years to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. God traveled with the people in what became known as the Tent of the Presence – the movable worship space within which God and Moses met face to face. So, we can surmise that Moses eventually knew what God looked like. What's up with that?

What *is* up with that? So many of the stories of the Old Testament point to this foundational question so many people of faith struggle with – what is God like? And related ones as well – how do we know when we have encountered God? And of the course the granddaddy question of them all – is there really a God? Dear Ones, all people faith wrestle with this question. It appears over and over again in the Old and New Testaments. And let's not forget that in the New Testament, Jesus himself answers this question eventually by saying that God – the Father – is visible in him. We know God when we know and love Jesus. Yes, we as Christians know that. But still. We want to know what God is like. Is God even a being of sorts or more of an energy force? Is it even possible for us to answer this question – probably not – and yet still we wonder. This is where Isaiah's description of God, whom he encounters in this fantastic vision, comes into our conversation this morning.

Clearly, Isaiah had been wanting to know what God looked like. And why God had chosen him as one of God's prophets – one of God's primary messengers to convey to the people God's thoughts and plans, hopes and dreams, for them. Isaiah, like most prophets, often received his messages from God through visions (a sort of vivid dream one can have while asleep or awake) and it is one such vision that this morning's text is describing. One of the things that makes Isaiah's recounting of this vision so intriguing is that he actually attempts to

place it within a concrete historical timeframe. He does this in the first few words of the text: “In the year that King Uzziah died.” King Uzziah was indeed a real king of Judah, although the exact times and details of his reign are sketchy. Isaiah’s reference of him, however, also conveys that Isaiah was a royal advisor in his role of prophet. In other words, when he spoke, people listened. And here he is in this text describing his direct encounter with God. Scholars think this could be intended to emphasize once again the importance of the Temple and the Holy of Holies therein, especially with Isaiah’s emphasis in his prophecies on the need for the people to repent of their continual sin.

Still, what I love about this text is the fantastical description of God. The seraphs in attendance, singing or chanting continually. The smoke – presumably from continual sacrifices burning on altars – filled the room where God was seated on the throne of heaven. God’s own robe was so massive that just the hem of it filled the room, the heavily scented smoke hovering over it. No wonder Isaiah describes himself as terrified! Interesting though is that we get no direct description of God’s own self. We know what the seraphs look and sound like. We know what the throne room looks like and smells like and sounds like, but still no clue about God’s own self. Perhaps because it is too glorious even for a prophet to behold and survive? We don’t know, but the images of Isaiah’s encounter with God are tantalizing indeed. They tell us so much about how Isaiah thought of God, as well as how the people he was charged with speaking to on God’s behalf thought of God as well. In other words, it could be argued that Isaiah saw what he expected to see.

This whole notion of how we see and understand God is what Robert Orsi is exploring in his wonderful book, *Between Heaven and Earth: Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study*

Them. This book was one of my most favorite I was assigned while at Harvard. We read Orsi during our first year at the Divinity School as a part of the second semester foundations course all Master of Divinity students were required to take. The reason was because we were being taught to understand, and appreciate, that the scholarly study of religion – Christianity or otherwise – was just that – scholarly. It was not intended as a religious or faith oriented endeavor – not at Harvard. No, at Harvard we were being taught to become scholars of religion in spite of our faith, not because of it. This makes it quite distinctive among most seminaries and divinity schools and it became what I most loved about my time studying there. I already had a deep faith when I arrived, but I wanted to know more about Christianity as my own faith as well as the mechanics of faith and belief. In other words, I wanted to know how it all worked in practical terms – how does one go from having faith, to deeply understanding it in order to live it out as fully as possible in one’s own life. This is what I studied at Harvard, and I still think of it as one of the greatest gifts God has ever given me.

So, what is it about Orsi’s book I found so fascinating that I have read it three times since graduating? Well, a couple of things. I love Orsi’s description of what religion is, in its essence. He writes, “Religion [is] a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together.”¹ To unpack that a little further, it helps to know that Orsi in this book is building his argument through an in-depth exploration of Roman Catholicism and how children are taught the tenets of that faith tradition. Orsi is exploring in his research why the church has become so ineffective in making sense to the younger generations.

¹ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, ©2005, Princeton University Press, p. 2.

What he writes about speaks not just to Catholicism, but to all Christian churches in many instances. For example, he notes the undeniable presence of “the deep antipathy between modern cultures all over the world and the practice and experience of sacred presence.”² We know this is true. How many people, perhaps in our own families, just do not understand why this “God stuff” is so important to those of us who commit a portion of our lives to worshiping in and volunteering through the church. Orsi argues that at least part of the reason is that, “the modern world has assiduously and systematically disciplined the senses not to experience the sacred presence.”³ In other words, the “smells and bells” approach to worship in the traditional Catholic mass is not valued by the modern world as it once was. Instead, it is seen as a relic of a bygone era with little relevance to the fast moving world of contemporary life. The same can be said of our much less formal and rigid style of worship in our own church. However in the case of Protestant churches, we have sometimes become guilty of being just too boring with sermons and liturgies relying on too many big words or services that are too stiff and formal. Case in point: it wasn’t that long ago that I was serving a church where those of us working with children and youth received notice from the Deacons, with the blessing of the Senior Pastor, asking us to “strongly discourage youth from wearing sneakers with their acolyte robes.” Unfortunately, this emphasis on formality within worship did not result in teaching the youth to “respect” their responsibilities. Instead, most of them decided that the church wasn’t happy letting them be themselves and a few years later, there was no acolyte program. Of course, such is not always the case as some kids

² Ibid., p. 12

³ Ibid. p. 12

love wearing the acolyte robes and the solemn processions in to light the candles and then extinguish them at the end of the service. But for many, all of this was ritual that made little sense. They just did not sense God there. The simple truth is that our world was rapidly becoming post-modern and post-Christian as our global perspectives and technological advances quickly outstripped the church's ability to keep up.

I think the void left in society when the church was struggling with obsolescence has been a big reason for the rise of the evangelical, non-denominational churches who quickly became invested with making the practice of faith into an entertainment experience emphasizing a “what’s in it for me” core message. Unfortunately, their emphasis on rock music and praise songs rife with bad theology but a good beat with easy to learn lyrics created a generation with only a superficial understanding of Jesus and what it means to be in relationship with God. Light shows and a rock concert vibe became the new normal in this kind of worship, but that has proven just as fleeting, perhaps more so, than the staid rituals of the Protestant mainline churches as well as the Roman Catholics and the Episcopalians. But, where does this leave us? How is God calling us to reclaim this sense of the sacred that Orsi sees as absolutely foundational to the church of the present and the future?

Orsi does have some advice for us to consider, especially as we are growing in our understanding of ourselves as a “threshold church” – a church on the verge of transformation and hopefully growth. First, he reminds us that “religion is the practice of making the invisible visible.”⁴ Making the invisible visible. Or, put another way, our primary function in the church is making this God we love, this Jesus we follow, visible to the people who think this entire church thing is a

⁴ Ibid. p. 73.

colossal waste of time. And how do we do that? This we know: By being a vibrant and active presence in our community – through our support of the WARM Center and the PNC, our support of Operation Fresh Start, our visible presence and support of the LGBTQ community at Westerly PRIDE. Added to this like icing on a cake is this church’s unmatched ability to offer hospitality to the community in so many different ways: Our Bazaar, our Attic Treasures sale both designed to make shopping affordable for everyone. And of course, our Sunday morning fellowship time is beyond compare, thanks to the efforts of Joann Spurley and our Deacons. Making the invisible visible. We do it well.

In conclusion, Orsi reminds us that, “religion cannot be understood apart from its place in the everyday lives, preoccupations and common sense orientations of men and women.”⁵ In other words, our practice of our Christian faith as we gather here each Sunday is what makes us the church. Being here together on a regular basis, whatever that means for each of us, is what creates, nurtures, and sustains the faith we make visible to the world through our actions. Put more simply, we practice our faith through living it as simply, as lovingly, as meaningfully as we can because our faith is what gets us through each day. Our church is what nurtures our faith, keeping it strong and helping it deepen. Our church, then, is where we learn what it means to live each day between heaven and earth. We are indeed deeply blessed by this amazing church. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁵ Ibid. p. 167.