

**Isa. 6:1–8**

**Ps. 29**

**Rom. 8:12–17**

**John 3:1–17**

# A Vision for Worship

**Goal for the Session**

*Participants will identify elements of worship in Isaiah's call and use them to vitalize their worship experiences.*

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Isaiah 6:1–8

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Michael H. Floyd

Jerusalem's royal temple is imagined as the earthly representation of YHWH's heavenly throne. Because the temple is the axial point at which heaven and earth come together, Isaiah can see from this location into the throne room above. Isaiah is surrounded by the smoke from burning sacrifices and incense, and by the noise from the festive throng of worshipers. This mirrors the praise of the heavenly attendants—represented by the seraphim—that surround YHWH's throne (cf. Ps. 29:1–2, 9b–10). The mythic imagery of the heavenly council is the antecedent of Trinitarian thinking: Christians are reminded that such a notion of God points to a mysterious divine-human encounter with sociopolitical consequences.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Donald K. McKim

From early times, Isaiah 6:1–8 has been viewed as pointing to what became the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The passage itself, of course, does not lay out a full-fledged view of God as eternally existing as three coequal persons. But taken with other biblical passages (especially from the New Testament) it anticipates what the early church gradually came to understand as the Trinity. The vision and call of Isaiah is one illustration of the way the triune God has been at work in history, as attested by the Scriptures. The Isaiah passage is a witness, pointing to the triune God's revelatory actions in calling Isaiah, and in the biblical story of salvation.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Kristin Emery Saldine

Isaiah's vision accentuates at least three characteristics of God's relationship with us: God encounters us in our historical context, God's word is revealed in our worship, and God calls us to serve. The elements of our worship—gathering, praising, confessing, praying, hearing, and responding—all are appropriate responses to the holy God who claims us. We should not be afraid to name the sins of our time, just as Isaiah did. Think of the image of the seraph cleansing Isaiah's lips with a live coal. That is how vibrant and powerful God's forgiveness is, drawing us into service and drawing our attention to the needs of the world beyond our own.

#### NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” G. Lee Ramsey Jr.

The faithful frequently wonder about vocation. How does God call the believer? How does one listen for the call of God, and how do we know if what we hear is the voice of God? The Isaiah account invites the congregation to hear and see how God calls the believer: from an awareness of the mysterious and frightening presence of God, to conviction and confession of sin, to reception of forgiveness, and finally to surrender to God's direction. The verses that follow (vv. 9–13) get Isaiah into a mess of trouble. Rather than a call to a settled ministry, God summons Isaiah to prophetic engagement with faithless Israel.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Isaiah 6:1–8**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Many adult Christians who attend church weekly may find themselves going through the worship elements without thinking about what they are doing or what the elements mean. Meanwhile, new Christians may find what happens in worship confusing. Today's lesson invites all adults to consider the elements of worship and what they mean.

Isaiah 6:1–8 is seen as the pattern for Christian worship. In addition, this passage has been viewed as pointing to the doctrine of the Trinity as referenced in Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Isaiah 6:1–8.) However, the focus of today's lesson is on worship and our relationship to God.

*Holy Spirit, open my mind to the wonder of Isaiah's vision as I prepare for leading this session. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- paper and pencils
- board or newsprint; markers
- masking tape
- copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

### For Responding

- option 1: copies of a recent worship bulletin
- option 2: Resource Sheet 2
- option 3: copies of a recent church newsletter, the announcement section of a recent bulletin, or a calendar of church activities

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, write on the board or newsprint the following definition of worship from *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* by Donald K. McKim (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996):

*Worship is the service of praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and petition directed toward God through actions and attitudes. Christian worship is Trinitarian in form as praise is offered to God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Also, write one letter of the word “WORSHIP” on each of seven sheets of newsprint. Display them in that order in your meeting space.

Greet each of the adults by name. As the group gathers, explain that they will be writing an acrostic on the word “worship.” Invite participants to write a word describing worship that begins with the letter at the top of each sheet.

After most have completed the activity, briefly review and clarify words people wrote for the acrostic activity. Then read the definition of worship that you wrote on the board earlier. Invite initial reactions and comments regarding the definition. Tell the group that today's lesson invites us to discuss worship as an encounter with God.

Remind participants that today is Trinity Sunday and pray aloud:

Today's text offers several topics for study, including the topic of worship and issues of the Trinity. This lesson focuses on the topic of worship but encourages participants who wish to reflect on issues of the Trinity to read all the excerpts in Resource Sheet 1.

The Hebrew word *abodah* has a twofold meaning. It means both "to worship" and "to serve." It has been suggested that Christians are gathered to worship and scattered to serve.

**EASY  
PREP**

*O blessed Trinity, in whom we know the maker of all things seen and unseen, the Savior of all both near and far: By your Spirit enable us to worship your divine majesty, so that with all the company of heaven we may magnify your glorious name, saying: Holy, holy, holy. Glory to you, O Lord most high. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

## EXPLORING

Introduce Isaiah 6:1–8 by informing participants that Isaiah's vision occurred the same year that Judah's King Uzziah died. King Uzziah's death initiated a time of instability in Judah and increasing threats from Assyria. It was also an important moment in Isaiah's receiving his call and summons to service. The Christian church has seen Isaiah's encounter with God and his call as a pattern for its own worship and experience of God. Have a volunteer read aloud Isaiah 6:1–8. Explain that while there are several worthy topics to study from this passage, today's lesson will focus on worship.

Ask the group to imagine themselves as Isaiah and to write on the board elements of worship and service found in Isaiah 6:1–8. Ask:

- ✧ What did Isaiah see and experience in this holy encounter that we might consider to be elements of worship?

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Isaiah 6:1–8) and read aloud the "So What?" excerpt. Ask participants to identify the elements of worship in the excerpt and to write them next to the elements of worship the group identified in the Isaiah text. There should be information in Isaiah 6:1–8 that relates to each element of worship in the "So What?" excerpt.

Form pairs and distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Isaiah's Vision). Allow time for all to read the resource sheet and invite the pairs each to take a few minutes to answer this question:

- ✧ How have you or your church community been changed through encounters with the living God?

Gather again as a large group and ask:

- ✧ How does Isaiah 6:1–8 and our discussion inform how we worship together?

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Worship and My Life** Distribute copies of a recent worship bulletin and paper and pens to each participant. Invite participants to identify:
  - ✧ the elements of worship they see in the worship bulletin that correspond to Isaiah 6:1–7
  - ✧ which, if any, elements of worship discussed today are absent in your worship bulletin
  - ✧ the element of worship where you most encounter God
  - ✧ the element of worship where you least encounter God

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 354.

After eight minutes briefly discuss responses. Discuss any suggestions for ways certain elements of your church's worship might help people better encounter the holy.

2. **What Is God Calling Me to Do?** Form groups of three or four and refer again to Resource Sheet 2. Ask groups to discuss the following questions and have a spokesperson ready to present the group's answers to the larger group after a few minutes.
- ✠ Why is it important for humans to confess their sins before God?
  - ✠ Based on Isaiah's experience of cleansing, what is the value of the forgiveness of sins or pardon in the worship service?

After five minutes invite groups to briefly share their findings.

Now invite participants to work alone and write a short prayer of confession they will not show the group but will use in the closing prayer.

3. **What Is God Calling the Church to Do?** Distribute copies of a recent church newsletter, the announcement section of a recent bulletin, or a list of your church's monthly activities. Together as a whole group make a list on the board or newsprint of all the service ministries. Facilitate a discussion concerning opportunities for service in the church. Ask:
- ✠ Following up on the earlier understanding of worship as praise and service, how is our worship extended beyond the time we gather to praise God together?

Invite participants to tell of any new types of service either in the congregation or in the community where they are active that they think others may wish to support.

## CLOSING

Gather in a circle. If the group did option 2 in Responding, have a time for silent reading of the participants' prayers of confession followed by reading Isaiah 6:7.

Then lead the group in the following prayer of thanksgiving:

*We thank you, God, for . . .  
beckoning us to come into the house of worship.  
confronting our sins and those of all humanity.  
forgiving our sins.  
the opportunity to serve you and your church.  
"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!" Amen. (Isaiah 6:8)*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, unless it will be e-mailed to participants during the week.

## Focus on Isaiah 6:1–8

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## Isaiah's Vision

These first eight verses of chapter six describe one of the best known of Isaiah's prophetic visions. Summoned to the throne of God and surrounded by the awe and terror of the Lord, Isaiah is struck with the realization of his own unworthiness and that of his people. He is not worthy to stand before the Lord, yet here he is in the presence of the Lord. He knows he is unworthy to serve, yet what other option does he have here at the throne of God? This is not the time to say no; it is the time, in Isaiah's words, to say woe. "Woe is me! I am lost." There is a deep mystery at work here, and it profoundly upsets Isaiah's equilibrium. But in the upsetting, Isaiah is able to confess his sin, be cleansed of his guilt, and receive a clean heart. Only then can he hear God's call with clarity. . . .

The sudden shift from the historical reference to Uzziah to the heavenly throne of God is meant to set us on edge: God is holy; we are not. This is the sad realization that hits Isaiah with such overwhelming force. . . . Yet it is this realization that opens Isaiah to the possibility of forgiveness. He is touched by divine intervention and made clean. Isaiah is now free to answer when God calls.

Isaiah's journey through confession, forgiveness, and commission occurs in the context of the worship of the Holy. Isaiah describes the Lord of Hosts as completely and divinely Other, the God who alone is worthy of eternal adoration, glory, and praise. . . .

Isaiah's encounter with the living God teaches us that there is no way to know God without being changed. That kind of transformation almost always leads to service, to work and witness in God's name. This requires that Christians practice a discipline of prayerful discernment, of listening for God's call in their lives. This is not just an individual endeavor but also the corporate practice of a worshipping community.

[We can see] the connection of Isaiah's vision with the pattern of our own worship: praise, confession/forgiveness, listening to the Word, and responding to the Word. Hymns, prayers and litanies would be chosen to follow that movement. The prayer of confession could be written with special attention to Isaiah's lament in verse 5. We are invited, before God, to confess our sin and the sin of the world. We should not be afraid to name the sins of our time, just as Isaiah did when he condemned Judah for her acts of political arrogance, spiritual pride, and economic injustice. But the assurance of pardon should be as strong as, if not stronger than, the confession. Think of the image of the seraph cleansing Isaiah's lips with a live coal. That is how vibrant and powerful God's forgiveness is. God's forgiveness draws us into service rather than away from it.

—From *Kristin Emery Saldine, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*  
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 26, 28, 30.

*Hallelujah*