

## **A Gift and a Task**

**Chris Currie**

**Isaiah 6:1-13**

February 6, 2022 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church New Orleans

Many years ago, teacher of worship and preaching Marva Dawn recounted a story that I hope is true. She was greeting people after worship as they were heading back out into the world, and someone took the opportunity to offer commentary on the closing hymn that was sung. I didn't like that last hymn, they offered. It was too hard to sing and didn't speak to me. Without missing a beat Dawn replied, 'that's okay...we weren't singing to you anyway.' Perhaps a bit too straightforward, but she has a point. Good strive to lift our hearts, feed our souls, and nourish our minds, but if it is all about marketing and manipulation and catering to our religious consumer desires, then we risk turning it into a form of religious entertainment or at the very least, make it about us.

On the other hand, aloof worship that does not seek to engage us or speak to us or demonstrate much of a need for us, can also swing the pendulum in the complete opposite direction. I don't think it would have been very fun to live in medieval Yorkshire and head to church only to have the priest speaking in Latin not in colloquial English, to have his back turned away from the common folk throughout the service, and to only be able to make out one or two words. At its best, worship must engage us and bring us into engagement with God. This passage from Isaiah has been used to outline what good worship should be like. The sovereign Lord of heaven earth, seated high and lofty on the divine throne with the hem of his robe filling the temple. Strange beings or the heavenly host with wings and multiple faces adding to the mystery, strangeness, and otherworldliness of the divine worship, singing aloud like we did earlier, 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts...and then there are the pivots of the foundations shaking at their voices and the whole house filling with smoke. There is something about worship that should not just make us feel like we are in the casual normal presence of our every day world, but it should be strange enough to draw us out of the world we just accept and offer us a different world, a world that gives us a different vision of who we are and what we are called to be in the world.

This past week, due to inclement weather throughout Texas and beyond, I had the opportunity to worship online with Austin Seminary's chapel service. At the close of the service, after the benediction had been given and the organ played the closing voluntary from the chapel, there were two pictures on the video screen, both taken from inside the chapel, but looking out through the entrances and open doors out into the world. One looked out the front doors of the chapel and onto the street and beyond to the University of Texas and city of Austin outside the open doors, and other picture looked out the side door of the chapel and out into the rest of the seminary campus with the library and

campus center in sight outside the door. Above the side door, was a crucifix, hanging above the door catty-corner. You might find it odd that a crucifix would be hanging in a Presbyterian seminary chapel at all, but it is actually not visible to the congregation because it hangs above the small nave facing the pulpit where it is only visible to the preacher and those who stand in the chancel, reminding whoever dares to preach that no matter how spectacular the sermon, we are not God; and if you think standing in a pulpit makes you divine, that crucifix is a reminder of what happened to Jesus Christ as well as those who seek to proclaim his gospel. It can be a threatening business. Anyway, the crucified Christ was visible hanging next to the open door to the world. And I thought those two pictures encapsulate the church's existence in the world. We are not a fortress that locks our doors and tries our best to keep the world from tumbling through our doors, but nor do we try to embrace our world without first having our vision altered by font and table and the crucified Christ hanging over us, reminding us that we don't leave him behind as we return to the commerce and business of our lives. The church's job is to help us see the world through him and through the stubborn loving people he refuses to choose us without.

Many years ago, in Scotland we would worship with our friends at the highest-church Anglican worship service I think I have ever been to...the whole liturgy was sung, except for the sermon, everything else, prayers, call to worship, responses, everything was chanted between the priest, the choir, and the congregation. At the beginning and end of the service, before the crucifer brought in the cross, and the acolytes came forward with the bible, a thurifer would come forward swinging a thurible or metal censer, suspended from chains, within which incense was burning, and the smoke was wafting throughout the congregation. Most of the acolytes, crucifers, thurifers, not to mention the rest of the procession of priests, deacons, and sub-deacons, all adorned in beautiful cassocks and vestments, could easily give the impression that all of the pomp and circumstance was just a little bit much, but I remember also thinking as the incense filled the room and the smoke wafted all around us, that some of this felt an awful lot like Isaiah 6 with the 'pivots on the thresholds shaking and the house filling with smoke.'

Sometimes worship shakes us out of our given reality and offers us a vision of a reality beyond what we thought we knew. While worship should be accessible, it may not all be immediately comprehensible. Richard John Neuhaus offers us the haunting image of the ministry intern, complaining about the relevance of pastoral care errands. 'I don't see the point in visiting Mr. Watson anymore; he's over ninety and senile and just babbles on or goes into deep silence, no matter what you say.' Neuhaus leaves us with this comment: 'To dismiss someone as senile is an easy way to relieve ourselves of the responsibility of reverence for those who have entered into languages and communications that we do not

understand.<sup>1</sup> This is also why it is dangerous to assume that someone with a physical disability or down syndrome or another kind of disability is unable to comprehend the grace of God or unable to confess and live the faith any less than a 'fully able person.' God can take our broken language, our faulty words, and our unclean lips and make us comprehensible even if it may not be to everyone around us. That is what he does to Isaiah here in verse 7, but that is what God does with us too. How can we of unclean lips speak a word of the Lord, Isaiah asks? And God does not so much make us holy and pure in order to do so but forgives what we have failed to be and enables us to speak a word from the Lord in spite of our unclean lips.

What I am about to tell you is probably obvious to you already, but the minister of word and sacrament is not any less sinful than the rest of the Christian community, nor are we always the people in the church doing the exemplary work of the Lord. But we are, in the words of J.T. Niles, one beggar telling other beggars where we found bread, we are one sinner telling other sinners where we found forgiveness, we are one sojourner telling other sojourners where we found our home, we are one flawed person telling other flawed people where to find wholeness, we are one stubborn self-sufficient accomplished person telling other stubborn self-sufficient accomplished people that we are dependent creatures and need each other and that is good news. We are one stable, type A, try to project that I have it all together persons telling other stable, type A, try to project that we have it all together people, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ disrupts our stable, neat and tidy type A lives with good tidings of great joy that will shake us up and put us into the lives of people we may never imagined for ourselves.

More than three decades ago, when Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld created the successful sit-com Seinfeld, one of their main mantras was this one: 'no hugging, no learning.' In other words the sit-com formula of the 1980's always started with a problem or crisis that by the end of the 22-minute episode ended with some kind of amazing resolution, either everyone hugging in a syrupy sentimental settlement or it would end with some moral or profound lesson being taught and hammered home. The creators of Seinfeld turned that model on its head and instead presented a bunch of characters who seem okay at first and piece by piece become unraveled by the end of the episode. Which is why it is interesting that our passage today does not end with everyone's problems being solved; it does not end with everyone learning something and fully comprehending everything. It does not end with everyone having all the answers and having all their needs met. Instead, it ends with what seems like a strange admonition: 'keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be

---

<sup>1</sup> Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 115.

healed.' It's almost if the point of worship and this peculiar and unconventional encounter with God is not to tie everything up with a beautiful bow or to get all the answers we were looking for or all hungers and desires we longed for met, but to unravel us a bit, to disrupt us, to free us from what we thought we knew, and open us to a way of life that transcends what we thought was everything, subverts what we thought we knew, and offers us a richer way of living than we ever thought possible. I don't understand worship. I don't get much out of it. It doesn't meet my needs. But as theologian Darrell Guder reminds us, the 'gospel which meets my needs' must be replaced with the good news that reveals (to me) needs I did not know I had while providing healing I never dreamed was possible.'<sup>2</sup>

A wise person of faith who struggled much of her life with Parkinson's disease but was faithful to the very end, continuing with all her might and heart and whole and strength to worship even when it could only be done with a wheelchair, had a saying that she developed as she was invited to speak to others struggling with Parkinson's and other diseases of the mind...she would say that the life of faith is a gift to be received with gratitude...and the life of faith is a task to be pursued with courage. In spite of Seinfeld's reverse lessons, there will be hugging and learning along the way, but full comprehension, complete understanding, perfection and completion, and having all our needs met may not even be the desired outcomes. Well then, what are? To learn to receive it all with gratitude, and with our whole selves, pursue it with courage. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 155.