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Sermon: Vertical and Horizontal
May 26, 2024
Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah 6:1-8: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸ 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!”

About ten years ago, a teenager set off an internet firestorm by taking a selfie while visiting Auschwitz. While posing for a selfie in front of a concentration camp, murder site, and gas chambers was bad enough, the reaction was predictable as well. Columnist Leonard Pitts writes that in the aftermath of the selfie posted the teenager was ‘harshly criticized, called vile names, and endured the lazy person’s terrorism, the Internet death threat.’¹ The selfie taker was nonplussed, commenting about all the internet fuss by retweeting, ‘I’m famous y’all.’ In his commentary on the whole confluence of events, which in a weird way describe our times I think, Pitts writes that this practice of snapping selfies ‘in appropriate places feels viscerally...wrong. It suggests a cluelessness, a shallowness, and an incapacity for reverence that have come to feel like the signature of these times.’ Pitts asks us these soul searching questions: ‘Do we taking nothing seriously? Is nothing so awful or awesome as to make us

¹ Leonard Pitts, ‘Selfies speak of incapacity for respect,’ Miami Herald, July 27, 2014.

look up from our own lives? Is no place so hallowed or holy that we would never think to use it as a stage upon which to showcase the fizzy wonderfulness of our own selves?”²

In an essay entitled ‘Law, Gospel, and the Great De-Churching,’ writer Bryan Jerrell recounts that active participation in a community of faith is optional in the current cultural context in ways it has not been in prior generations. Referencing the 2023 book entitled *The Great De-Churching*, a study researching the decline in church attendance over the past thirty years, Jerrell writes that ‘in a western nation that’s known for its unusual devotion to religious belief, the authors of the book outline how church attendance since the 90s has functioned as the opposite of a ‘great awakening,’ and that some 40 million Americans used to attend church regularly and now don’t, which accounts for around 12% of the nation’s population.’³ The ‘why’ of this phenomenon is harder to interpret, but there are things like clergy abuse scandals and the struggles of churches to acknowledge the lives and gifts of LGBTQ+ siblings, and there are those who refuse to have any compassion for or conversation with those who see the world or their lives differently. In sum, that is not something we should talk about at church. And as a result, people stop going because they think the vertical has nothing to do with the horizontal.

Recently the co-creator of ‘Seinfeld’ and the inspiration behind ‘Curb Your Enthusiasm,’ comedian Larry David, ended the 12 season series that began back in 1999. In a tribute piece about David’s Jewish humanism in *The Nation*, Daniel Bessner points out that the comedic background and tone that formed David in the post-war Jewish neighborhood of Brooklyn instilled in him a belief that ‘nothing is off limits,’ and all subjects, no matter how sensitive or sacred, ‘could be grist for the comedic mill.’⁴ In the course of the show David would push the envelope on what topics to address but throughout was guided throughout by his willingness to shine the light on anything for comedic and

² Leonard Pitts, ‘Selfies speak of incapacity for respect,’ Miami Herald, July 27, 2014.

³ <https://mbird.com/religion/church/law-gospel-and-the-great-de-churching/>

⁴ Daniel Bessner, ‘The Last Man,’ in *The Nation* (April 8, 2024), <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/curb-your-enthusiams-larry-david/>

audience engagement. At this point, you may be wondering what selfies at Auschwitz, strong headwinds at church attendance over the last thirty years, and comedian Larry David have to do with each other. But here goes an explanation...when we lose our connection with the vertical, we lose the breadth of the horizontal as well.

In his book about the Reformed faith, theologian John Leith writes that while efforts to identify Reformed faith or Calvinism with one theme that explains it all can be elusive, 'a case can be made that the central theme of Calvinist theology, which holds it all together, is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the *living* God. In other words, we are constantly moving from one holy encounter with the divine to the next one and we always should keep alert and be paying attention because all life and all moments have to do with the living God. That is certainly what the backdrop of our passage from Isaiah points to, as the six winged seraphs spread their wings and call out 'holy, holy, holy,' reminding all that they are in the presence of someone sacred and that 'the whole earth is full of his glory.' Isaiah's call happens in this moment of mystery, this moment of worship, this moment of a thin place, where the mysterious holiness of the divine brushes up against Isaiah's unclean lips. What if what people are missing or no longer get a sense of is this connection with the vertical, this sense that our lives, our goings our comings, our trivialities and our big moments, that all of it has to do with the living triune God and that every moment, not just our sacred moments, are shot through with the glory of God?

In his book *Finding Our Balance*, teacher of preaching and worship Ron Byars reminds us something that is at the heart of this passage from Isaiah, that 'God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts.' He continues: 'God's wisdom will always challenge conventional wisdoms of every sort. God's call to obedience will always put us in tension with other loyalties. To serve God will not always reward us with the applause of our neighbors,' and God's agenda may include but at times oppose all our agendas. Byars pointedly laments that we often reduce God to 'a divine butler, or to the mascot invoked to support one side in the culture wars, or to a God interested only in

the details of our personal salvation while indifferent to the rest of the created world and to injustice—to a God whose promise of a new creation, a new heaven and earth, has been whittled down to who goes to heaven and who doesn't.⁵

Perhaps what Isaiah is reminding us in this call moment and moment of awe and sacred mystery before the divine is that the more robust the vertical, the more expansive the horizontal. To be engaged with a big God, a holy God, a living God that is interested in every aspect of our lives and the life of the world, helps us to see and be engaged more deeply with every aspect of life in this world. One of the big contributions and transformation of the Protestant Reformation from the state of medieval Christianity, was the notion that the sacred and the holy could extend beyond the cloister and the monastery and the holy order and that every vocation was a God-given calling that implored each person to use their gifts to serve God and serve their neighbor. None other than Martin Luther King, Jr. illuminates this insight about the sacred in his famous observation that “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’” The vertical shapes and furthers the horizontal.

Ron Byars reminds us again that ‘where there is no mystery—where even the most profound spiritual claims seem within the grasp of the intellect—the product is a certain barrenness;’ on the other hand, where everything is vertical and mystery and everything is cast loose from reason and the challenges of everyday life, ‘there is likely to be superstition.’ Byars thinks it is curious and strange that we live in a time and in a society that ‘produces churches (hostile to) and stripped of traditional ceremony that borrows instead ‘models of therapeutic speech and concert,’ while at the same time has a New Age movement with crystals, candles, and out of body experiences with no evidence of being

⁵ Ron Byars, *Finding our Balance: Repositioning Mainstream Protestantism*, 52.

constrained by reason.’⁶ At the very same time that there is a decline in religious participation, there is a rise in superstition and magic.

In contrast, in the presence of Jesus Christ, there is both vertical and horizontal. The awe and reverence and wonder in the presence of the divine, but also the impulse and movement back into the life of the world, into the horizontal, to see every corner of the world and every life as having to do with God, not remaining forever in the rarified air of the spiritual mountaintop, but going back into the world to love it, transform it, and encounter God’s glory in lives that look far from sacred at first glance and places that look far from redeemed from where we stand.

John Burgess is a Presbyterian theologian who took a Sabbatical year, and he along with his family moved to St. Petersburg, Russia for a year to immerse themselves in the life of a Russian Orthodox parish. What Burgess found in those Orthodox communities of faith was a strong sense of the vertical, in worship and icons, that sought to point them to the ‘transformed reality that lives in and around us all the time.’ While Burgess found that Orthodoxy is oriented almost exclusively to the vertical, he worries that American Christianity ‘has lost the sense of standing before a holy God,’ and ‘authentic veneration and reverence’ has been replaced by emotional manipulation. Loyalty to the apostolic faith has been reduced, he worries, to religious marketing and we live in a context in his view where ‘individuals refuse to say a creed until they have determined whether they agree with all of it.’⁷ He fears we are in danger of reducing the sovereignty of God to a sovereignty of self. If I can’t feel it, prove it, or experience it, then it cannot be real.

Vertical and horizontal. We need both and without both faith becomes distorted, and we become fixated on chasing mountaintop experiences or reducing faith to the rational practicalities of the quotidian and day to day and reducing God to a divine presence overlooking everything dispassionately from afar. But Isaiah seems present to us a holy reverence standing before the mystery of

⁶ Ron Byars, *Christian Worship*, 32.

⁷ Ron Byars, Book Review, *Presbyterian Outlook*

God will not entice us to wallow on the rarefied mountaintop forever, but will give us fresh inspiration and energy and insight and love to propel us down the mountain and onward from our mysterious encounter with the divine, so that we better put our faith into practice, that we better embrace the needs and challenges of the world, or see needs and lives we may have never noticed or saw before, and will be gifted to see much farther horizontally than we have could see before and be opened to lives we may not have realized were our responsibility and concern. That is what happens with the mystery of the vertical and expands our horizontal and stretches our hearts, challenges our minds, and fills our souls, and helps us better to see that the whole earth is full of God's glory. No matter where we look. No matter with whom we are connected. In the presence of the Holy, no person and no place is off limits, no person or place is so far horizontal that they are not connected to the vertical. No place us is so profane that the vertical cannot call upon us to remove the shoes from our feet, for we are standing on holy ground.

Vertical and horizontal. May you find both in service to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Benediction

Vertical and Horizontal.

May God stretch your lives in both directions for the sake of Jesus Christ.

And into the Lord's sure keeping I commit you now....