

“I Saw the Lord”

Somewhere around 742 B. C. a young man named Isaiah goes into the temple in Jerusalem. It was the year the King of Judah, Uzziah, died after a long and fruitful reign of some 40 plus years. Something happens there in the temple that will change Isaiah’s life! He has a vision of God!

Turn to Isaiah 6. The account begins: "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" (Isaiah 6:1). Isaiah sees some celestial creatures called *seraphs* – half-human-like beings with 6 wings. "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. And one called to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke" (Isaiah 6:2-4).

Try to picture the scene: there is the awesome sense of God being there, seraphs are there, covering their faces with 2 wings, their feet with 2 wings, and using the other 2 wings to fly. The foundation of the temple shakes and is filled with smoke!

Overwhelmed by a sense of the presence of the Holy God, Isaiah realizes his own sinfulness, and the evil all around him: "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!" (verse 5). God hears his heartfelt confession. God forgives him and makes him clean: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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" (verses 6-7).

But the action doesn't stop there! Before he leaves the temple, Isaiah dedicates himself to God, and to the task that God has for him: "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!'" (verse 8).

What a great story from the Bible! Isaiah says, “I saw the Lord, high and exalted...” (Isaiah 6:1). Let me ask you this: How often do you and I go out of the worship service here saying, “I saw the Lord, high and exalted”? “God was here today! I felt the presence of the Almighty!” That’s really why we’re here! To experience God. To sense God’s claim on our life and to dedicate ourselves to God and His purposes.

But how do we connect with God? What kind of worship will help us experience the living God? There is a huge difference of opinion today on these questions. Especially over the last 20 or so years there has been a lively debate in the church, even anger and fighting, over what kind of worship will best help people experience God and connect with God.

For some, this happens through what we might call “traditional worship”. This includes things like a printed bulletin, organ music, robed choirs, hymns out of a hymn book, perhaps written prayers or responsive readings. This kind of worship can be especially meaningful to

those who've grown up in the church. Maybe they had parents or somebody who brought them to church when they were young. Perhaps some of us can remember Sunday School, or singing in a children's choir, or listening to the organ and singing some of the great hymns of the faith. Those cherished memories are part of our memory bank. So, today, for some of us, when we sing an old hymn, or take communion, or attend a Maundy Thursday service, it brings back memories of meaningful experiences from our past, and we feel closer to God.

I think of my own experiences at Ross Street Church in Lancaster when I was young. The fellowship hall downstairs that would be partitioned off for Sunday School classes. Going to Sunday School in my grade school years. Little Mrs. Huber, the kind Sunday School Superintendent. And Maundy Thursday communion services in the dimly lit church, that seemed to make it a sacred place. I can hear certain hymns today and still remember singing those hymns at Sunday morning or Sunday evening services. All of this brings back fond memories.

For some, the best chance of connecting with God, and being able to say, "I saw the Lord, high and exalted", is through a traditional style of worship.

But you know what? This is not true of everybody. In fact, fewer and fewer people today connect with God through traditional worship services. This is especially true of *younger people*. *One of the reasons why this is true is that people under 50 bring a whole different set of life experiences to the table than those over 50!*

More and more people are growing up without any connection to or memory of church. For these people, to walk into a traditional church service would be like going to a foreign country. Many of the things done in a traditional form of worship are strange and have no meaning for the younger generation. Now please hear me: *This is having a tremendous impact on the church today and its ability to reach people and speak to their needs! And this in large part even determines whether a congregation will continue and survive!*

So, for many people to be able to come out of church and say, "I saw the Lord" – I connected with God and experienced God.....***alternative types of worship experiences have to be offered.***

Church consultant and former pastor Bill Easum says, "Christian worship in North America is undergoing a fundamental change for the first time...throughout our history worship was based on 3 things: 1. The printed page 2. A 16th century appreciation of music 3. A culture that embraced Christianity". Easum says, "All three of these foundations are disappearing from North American culture."

First, we are a ***visual culture***, not a print culture (e.g. TV, video, smart phones, computer images and graphics). Yet most churches still try to communicate the gospel and God's truth in the old style based on a print culture. Second, appreciation for ***European style, 16th century music*** is lessening. How many people listen on their car radio to music that sounds like church hymns?

Or buy CDs of organ music? Or download organ tunes on their ipod?

Do you know what are the most listened to radio stations in Lancaster County? As of several years ago (the last year I was able to obtain information), WIOV (a country station) and WLAN (a pop hits station) took turns being the most listened to radio stations. How many churches have taken that seriously?

A third reason why Christian worship in North America is undergoing a fundamental change is that our culture *no longer embraces Christianity* like it once did. More and more people have grown up outside the church, and have a more hostile, suspicious view of Christianity and organized religion.

An important factor in all of this is how old we are and the generation in which we grew up. You've probably heard terms like "Baby Boomer" or "Buster". Many studies have been done on the characteristics of those born within certain years. While these are generalizations, I think this data can provide helpful information that we can take seriously as we think of worship.

Those of us 71 years or older (born before 1946) are called by some *Boosters* (or *Builders*). This is the generation born between 1927 and 1945. This generation is a stabilizing generation – most supportive of American culture, institutions and values. Those in this age bracket are more prone to go to church out of a sense of *loyalty* and to revere a traditional kind of worship and music. Of course there are exceptions: some over 70 prefer contemporary music and worship. In the contemporary services I've held or visited in other churches, there is a smattering of older people in those services! But for the most part, the Builders generation appreciates *quietness and silence* in worship, with a focus on *forgiveness and the removal of our guilt*.

Those individuals born from 1946 to 1964 are called *Baby Boomers*. This represents a huge number of Americans! The oldest Baby Boomers are about 70-71. This group includes people like Steven Spielberg, Bruce Springsteen, Dolly Parton, Bill Clinton. While there is much diversity among Baby Boomers and they're not all alike, in terms of worship, they tend to differ from those of the Builder Generation in what they want and like. Instead of getting hung up on reverence and forgiveness, they are more prone to want worship to have the motif of *joy and celebration* – to be *an experience that is felt*, rather than information aimed at the head. Since most Baby Boomers don't come to church out of a sense of loyalty, they *expect* worship to *give them something for daily life, to be practical, informal and more casual*. Baby Boomers as a whole prefer music that is more like *1950's or 1960's soft rock - praise music*.

Those born between 1965 and 1983 have been called *Busters* (or *Generation X, Gen-Xers*). This generation are now around 34 to 52 years old. They are the children of Boomer parents – but they are very much different from their Baby Boomer moms and dads! Perhaps the word that best describes Busters as a group is the word *chaos*. It's estimated that as many as 40% of people in their mid 30's and mid 40's came from broken homes. As a result, Busters aren't into wealth, but into *survival*. *What kind of worship might attract Baby Busters?* First, music will be

loud and fast-paced (the soft melodic praise choruses of Boomers will not cut it for many Busters). *Silence and quietness* are taboo with Busters (who grew up with MTV, where a 5 second time lapse is too long) Busters tend to look for worship that is *felt and experienced* – not just appealing to the intellect. They want worship that's *casual and informal* (jeans and sneakers). Busters are asking: Can you *get real* with me? Can you offer me *hope*? Of course, growing up with iPods, iPads and smart phones, Busters respond much better to *visual media* rather than printed hymnals and bulletins and traditional sermons.

The next group younger than Busters have been called *Generation Y, or more often Millennials (millennial kids)*. While sociologists give different dates for when the Millennial generation begins, it generally encompasses those born after 1980 or 1983. Research is being done all time on this emerging generation! We do know that this generation is into technology (cell phones, instant messaging, internet). They multi-task. They are less inclined to go to church or affiliate themselves with any religious group, yet they are into “spirituality”. They have a spirit of volunteerism and want to change the world. They are more tolerant and open-minded, and celebrate diversity. We can imagine, then, that if Millennials do come to worship, generally speaking they have no interest in traditional services or even the soft praise music of contemporary worship, or in speaker who stands behind a pulpit and presents a sermon that's like a lecture.

All right. Enough of the demographics. You may say, “Why are you spending all this time telling us about some of the characteristics of each generation?” Well, it's because *how a person connects with God in worship depends a lot on the age and the life experiences of that person*. An astounding fact is that in the United States, since the middle of the last century, each succeeding generation is different! *So when it comes to worship, one size doesn't fit all*.

In designing worship experiences, the church has to ask: Who do we want to reach? For example, if we decide to go with traditional worship services, the people we can expect to come will be people who are older, who've had some connection to a church in their past. And if we *are* getting younger people to a traditional service, we can bet that these will be young people who grew up in the church.

Do you have children or grandchildren in their late teens or 20's? Are they coming to church? Can the church be open to newer styles of worship in order to reach our children or grandchildren? An older person was talking to a young person. They had some sharp differences over the kind of music each wanted in church. The elderly woman said, “Why don't you like my music?” Do you know what the young man answered? He said, “Why don't you like mine?” This got the elderly woman to thinking. He had made a good point. And this understanding kind of bridged the gap between them in a small way.

In all of our discussion about worship it's important to keep this in mind: There is no one order of worship, or style of worship, or type of music that is commanded in the Bible! Worship style is a *cultural* thing. In my work in Kenya, I learned from experience that their style of worship is different from what I was used to. It is distinctively African! Many traditional

worship services have their roots in the Europe of the 1600's, 1700's, 1800's. So, it's a *European* style worship, not necessarily a *Biblical* style!

Worship described in the Bible is very different from our worship today! Hebrew worship was loud and exuberant – shouting to the Lord, playing tambourines and stringed instruments, even dancing! In 1 Corinthians 14 we get a glimpse into worship in the early church. 1 Corinthians 14:26 says, "What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all thing be done for building up." This describes worship where the people participate, by someone singing a hymn, or sharing some revelation of God that has been given to them, or some speaking in tongues and following that up with the interpretation of the tongues message. I haven't met many people today insisting that our worship here be a copy of that!

Isaiah goes into temple, and he has an encounter with God that causes him to proclaim, "I saw the Lord" – I met God there!

What type of worship best connects *you* with God? I'm sure that among us, we have different tastes and preferences in worship style.

So, given the scenario I've presented, what do we do? How can we address the differing needs and desires that we have in worship? ***Perhaps the best solution is to offer various styles of worship*** . Many churches do. An increasing number of churches today offer both a "traditional" style worship and a "contemporary" form of worship. We could do that here. We could keep this service traditional, and add a different type service each week. It could be on Sunday or even another day of the week. How about Country & Western service? But we need to realize that to add another service takes a huge commitment of time, effort, and talent in order to staff another service *so that it's done well!*

Some churches try to combine several styles into one. This is often called a "blended service" In some cases, this works well. But there is also the risk that in a blended form of worship we manage to do things that tick everybody off! (In a sense we are doing somewhat of a blended service here by offering different styles of music).

I would welcome your input as to what kind of worship is meaningful for you. However, we also need to be asking the question: ***Who do we want to reach, and what type of worship will provide the best chance of doing that?*** For after all, worship is not just about me and what I like, but about what can help people who are not yet committed followers of Jesus to connect with God.

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