

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

The whole thing was built for 1.6 million, and that was in 1968. For many people's architectural taste, not to mention their piety, it was too modern. But even if one didn't like the Cathedral of Christ the King in Kalamazoo, Michigan, one had to concede that it was architecturally striking. Two years ago when it was sold for 1.2 million, the Diocese of Western Michigan seemed nonchalant about the \$400,000 loss. The cathedral community sponsored me for ordination, and it's where I was ordained both deacon and priest, so its sale and rebranding as an evangelical chapel saddens me, and of course, was a blow to the people who worshiped there week in and week out.

I first walked through the doors nearly 20 years ago. I wasn't taken immediately with all the ritual, but there was something about the people, their warmth and their welcome, that led me to return, and before too long, the cathedral, the congregation, and the Episcopal Church became home.

Some of what we do at Epiphany might seem a bit strange—the silence before the service, the dressing up in vestments and processing, the singing, sitting and standing, the saying certain repeated phrases such as, “The Lord be with you...And also with you.” Why all this formal business called worship and liturgy?

Now let me guess...For some of you your hearts may be sinking, at least a little. Maybe you came this morning

looking for practical advice—three steps to better behaved children, four ways to get over a broken relationship, five steps to closing the gap between the rich and poor. And if that's what you're looking for, then chances are that hearing a lot of talk about worship may not sound so exciting.

But Christian faith is not first of all about being practical and useful. It's about encountering an immense, overwhelmingly mysterious God made known particularly and richly in Jesus. In my remarks at Wednesday's annual meeting I alluded to Bishop Shaw's sermon at our Celebration of New Ministry last month. You'll remember that he suggested that our mission and ministry must always emerge from our worship.

The prophet Isaiah's vision occurred during worship; we learn about it in our first lesson this morning. There inside the vast, smoke-filled temple, the veil between this world and eternity parts, and Isaiah sees into the heart of reality itself. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty," he says. He sees six-winged angels, calling to each other in the words we call the Sanctus, which we sing every week in our Eucharist: *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."*

At the heart of reality, the vision tells us, is an endless song of joy and praise in which Isaiah encounters God.

Sometimes we catch glimpses of that holiness in moments of awe and reverence—walking on a beach, or listening to a Beethoven symphony, or holding a new grandchild, or bringing food for a family whose loved one is dying, or just sitting quietly inside a church. My guess is we've all been with people in times of great joy or terrible loss when we knew without a doubt that we were standing on holy ground.

When we worship here we are on holy ground, and so we're careful how we speak and what we do. We bow in reverence, we make the sign of the cross to dedicate ourselves, we greet the holy in each other when we pass the peace. Yet our coming here to this building, or any other church, to make these motions and to say these words isn't about marking this place off as the only holy of holies.

Instead we do all these things so that we might see God in the daily routines of our lives: in the setting of the sun, in our serving food at a soup kitchen, in our helping our daughter with her homework, in the burying of a beloved member of the community...in everything.

For all the intensity of Isaiah's encounter with the holy One, the story doesn't end with his ecstatic vision. Just the opposite. "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." But the story continues: God closes the gap between divine holiness and human brokenness. Suddenly an angel takes a burning coal

and touches Isaiah's mouth and cleanses his sin. Then God speaks saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah says, "Here am I; send me!" Isaiah's profound experience of worship in the temple takes him into the world. Mission emerges from worship.

The same thing happens in our gospel story: when Peter sees the immense catch of fish that comes from being with Jesus, he has his own experience of being overwhelmed by holiness. He throws himself down at Jesus' feet and exclaims, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" And then Jesus reaches toward him saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." We encounter Jesus, and he reaches out to forgive, to heal, and to call us and send us.

The more busy and driven we become, the more we lose a sense of holiness in each other, in the world around us, and in the most vulnerable. And like Isaiah and Peter did, we too have a decision to make. Will we follow and learn more and go deeper? Will we say yes to the call?

And if worship isn't the primary reason you're part of this community, or exploring this community, remember that to fully embrace the primacy of worship takes time and it takes practice. Let God speak to you this morning. Listen to the words of scripture, sing these hymns, receive the bread and wine, and let God reach through them directly to you.

The building isn't insignificant, but it's not what we worship. I'm sure the people in Kalamazoo can tell us this,

if we need convincing. Their cathedral is gone, but their mission and ministry and weekly worship stands strong. We worship a God who comes to us wherever and whenever we worship, who calls us by name, and who sends us to be disciples of Jesus.