



good shepherd  
presbyterian church

## **Authentic Worship**

Isaiah 58:1-12

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Nine months ago, if someone said that we could no longer sing together, shake hands, give hugs, must remain 6 feet apart, and slather hand sanitizer all over at every opportunity in order to be together - I wouldn't have believed it. Back in March when we stopped gathering together here in the building, I thought (along with others) this is such a bizarre time in which we are living. Then spring break plans had to be cancelled and we learned that Ashley wouldn't be returning to campus but would remain with us the rest of the semester. That meant having all four of us in our family figure out how to work and study from home for longer than a few weeks. Then May 6th came. Most of you would be unaware of the significance of that date - unless you are someone passionate about singing.

You see, on May 6, representatives from several professional organizations for choral directors and vocalists sat down with medical experts to ask about the risks of singing during the pandemic. When this two hour video conference was finished singers were disheartened. My Facebook feed began to blow up with people grieving the information that was shared. To sum up the conclusions: singing is risky when done in a group - especially in an enclosed environment where even the standard 6ft social distance rule isn't enough because of the very nature of singing.

You see, singing produces much more microscopic moisture particles conducive to carrying the virus; and, that moisture - called aerosols - can hang in the air for at least 3 hours. So, if an infected person is singing in a choir or a congregation but does not know they are infected, they may infect the many people with whom they are singing or worshipping because their aerosols are hanging in the air for all to breathe.

I have to be honest - this information hit me hard. My insecurities and anxieties bloomed. What does that do for choirs? What does that do for congregations and

therefore what does it mean for worship? Singing and worship are my passions! I needed time to process this, and so I had to dig down hard into my experience as a worship director and cry out to God and ask “what now?” How can we worship if we can’t sing together?

As my mind cleared a bit and I began to process things, I believe the Holy Spirit led me to Isaiah 58 and conversations we had in my previous church when I was Director of Worship and Arts, In this position I led a team of volunteers and staff that, on behalf of church leadership, was tasked with setting the vision for worship and coming up with policies to keep us in line with that vision. We had many great conversations, and it’s where I learned most of what I know about the theology of worship. Reverend George Mossel, our pastor (and my boss at the time), was a part of the team and he was instrumental in these discussions.

At some point we decided that we needed to come up with a list of values (and their definitions) to guide us in the planning of our worship services. One of our values was that we wanted our worship to be “authentic” and so our pastor led us to Isaiah 58. So, this morning, let’s dive in and look at what Isaiah is teaching us about worship so long ago.

Isaiah and the other OT prophets were concerned for God’s people. They spoke on God’s behalf and the news wasn’t good. The people of Israel and Judah had continuously broken their covenant promise to follow God’s laws; and, having shown them mercy over and over again and showing almost 900 years of patience with His people, the consequences of their broken promises would soon occur. They would be taken into exile. In Isaiah 58 we hear God speaking through Isaiah about one of their worship practices called Fasting. This was an act where the people would deprive themselves of food for a stated amount of time. Now Isaiah is specifically talking about fasting, but we could easily apply the same principle to any spiritual discipline or act of worship such as praying or singing.

Now when the people of Judah fasted, they were to give up food so that, in humility, they could discern wisdom and seek to understand God’s heart more so that they might know where they need to repent and change and become more holy. Along with the wearing of sackcloth and ashes, the people did this during national times of mourning and at certain festivals where this was required. The people were faithful in observing these times, BUT things weren’t going their way and they were becoming a bit perturbed with the Lord. We read in verse 3 that they were asking God the following:

*'Why have we fasted,<sup>(H)</sup> .... 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled<sup>(I)</sup> ourselves, and you have not noticed?'<sup>(J)</sup>*

The people of Judah were frustrated! They were doing all the right things but it seemed to them that the right things weren't happening in return! Their relationship with God was more contractual. If they fasted, sacrificed, prayed, or some other religious activity, then God would provide benefits to them. In essence they're saying "What's up, God? Why aren't you listening? Why aren't you blessing us?" The thing is - God listened. In verse 2 God says,

*For day after day they seek<sup>(E)</sup> me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken<sup>(F)</sup> the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near<sup>(G)</sup> them.*

God listened BUT was not pleased. Listen to vss 3c-5.

*Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please<sup>(K)</sup> and **exploit all your workers.***

*<sup>4</sup>Your fasting ends in **quarreling and strife,**<sup>(L)</sup> and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard<sup>(M)</sup> on high.*

*<sup>5</sup>Is this the kind of fast<sup>(N)</sup> I have chosen, **only a day for people to humble<sup>(O)</sup> themselves?** Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed<sup>(P)</sup> and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?<sup>(Q)</sup> Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?*

God's people were hypocrites. In Isaiah 29:13 God says

*"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

They didn't fast out of love for God or a desire to honor Him. They fasted because they thought the Lord would give them stuff. They fasted to manipulate God into doing their bidding. Sure, they deprived themselves of food, but they expected a reward from God.

They pleaded with God to hear them and answer their prayers while at the same time they abused the people who work their land.

They didn't fast to hear from God. Fasting became a ritual devoid of meaning. It became a self-serving act full of hypocrisy. The worship the people of Judah offered was false.

In verse 5 we read that the people of Judah humbled themselves for a day while the Lord calls His people to always live in humility. This is a big theme throughout the book of Isaiah. Throughout the 66 chapters Isaiah wants God's people to understand that God is the Holy One of Israel. God is totally Other. The Lord is transcendent. Perfect in righteousness and demanding justice. In light of that holiness, God's people are humbled and made deeply aware of sin because; and, here's the good news that Isaiah also brings: God is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. The Lord comes down to those weighed down by burdens. He forgives those who, in humility, repent and seek to live with complete trust in God. True worship or authentic worship - in response to God's holiness and mercy - looks like verses 6 and 7 of our passage. God's people are

*to loose the chains of injustice<sup>(S)</sup>  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed<sup>(T)</sup> free  
and break every yoke?<sup>(U)</sup>  
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry<sup>(V)</sup>  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter<sup>(W)</sup>—  
when you see the naked, to clothe<sup>(X)</sup> them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?<sup>(Y)</sup>*

The people of Judah were fasting and praying and offering sacrifices and doing all of the religious stuff they were supposed to. But God knew their hearts weren't in it. He knew because the way they treated other people didn't match the prayers they said and the sacrifices they offered.

The people of Judah aren't the only ones that struggle with false worship. When we worship - are we seeking to remember who God is and our need for God? When we sing are we focused on bringing glory to God or on the feeling the music stirs in us (good or bad)? When we read Scripture are we desiring to know God's heart or are we looking for the Bible to prove what we want rather than what it actually means? Any act of worship can become self-centered and meaningless.

Authentic worship is the yielding of our words and actions to God's ways and will in response to the saving grace of Jesus. Will we do it perfectly on this side of heaven? No, but it is a sincere, heart-felt desire to bring glory and honor to God and it takes many forms. It can be heartfelt prayer and energetic singing. It can be fighting for justice and caring for the poor. Authentic worship marries together our actions with our words. We sing to praise God, and we live to bring honor to God.

- In the weeks leading up to Christmas and we work hard to transform our worship space into a Christmas shoppe for the poor and we treat them with dignity, we have worshiped our Savior.
- When our youth go to places that need help cleaning up the properties of those unable to do so themselves, our youth worship the Lord.
- When we support the efforts of believers to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth, we truly worship.
- When we take the time to help at-risk children in the local school - in whatever form that takes - we authentically worship the Lord.
- When we speak up for the oppressed minorities in our communities, we bring glory to God.
- When we give up comforts in order to protect the lives of the vulnerable, our worship is authentic.

Friends, when we do these types of things in response to the overwhelming love of Jesus, we are as Paul states in Romans 12: *offering [our] bodies as a living sacrifice,<sup>(B)</sup> holy and pleasing to God—this is [our] true and proper worship.*

Anything that we do or say that honors and glorifies God is authentic worship.

### **Example of my modern day fast**

Back in Isaiah 58 vss. 8-12 we learn what happens as a result of authentic worship. Here, the people of Judah were promised that if they truly fast then their light will shine in the darkness (vs 10). This is an echo of the promise God made to Abram thousands of years before when the Lord told him that "all peoples of the world will be blessed through him." (Gen 12:3)

Jesus applies this same promise to those who would follow him in his Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5. He says to his followers,

*<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*

Friends, we cannot sing praises to our God on Sunday and live as we choose the rest of the week. Our worship on Sundays is empty and meaningless if we are not glorifying the Lord with our lives Monday through Saturday. Conversely, our worship on Sundays should lead us to know and understand God’s heart more and more so that, with humility, we will be a light for all to see.

So, in a time of no singing together, pre-recorded songs, and unable to hug people type of services, why do I find comfort in Isaiah’s words? Because for God’s people, authentic worship is more than a Sunday sermon or a rockin’ worship team or a beautiful choir. True worship is more than the ringing of handbells or fellowship with each other. Authentic, true worship is about experiencing God’s love for us as shown in the person of Jesus Christ and responding to that overwhelming love with grace, humility, and compassion that flows to the needy, the vulnerable, and the broken around us.

Earlier I listed things we do here at GSPC that I believe display a congregation whose desire is to seek God’s heart, discern where the Lord is leading, and to follow it. I hope Session will continue to challenge us to do so. I wonder if four times per year we did not meet on Sunday here at the building - but met as a church - to sort food for Second Harvest Food Gleaners, or to worship with brothers and sisters from another tradition, or to do some other charitable work. And here’s why: to remind ourselves that authentic worship, in all of its various forms, is about seeking and discerning the heart of God and bringing glory and honor to our Lord Jesus Christ.