

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, October 1, 2017**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 19; John 1:1-5,14-18**  
**“High and lifted up”**

Of all the phrases that have crept into use in the church in western culture in recent years, the saddest of all has to be made up of just two words: worship wars. The sad fact is that worship wars have been known to tear congregations apart, and to set congregations against their Christian neighbours, as people dig in their heels and insist that the way they conduct worship is the only right, proper, decent and correct way for people to worship God.

Whether we call it formal or informal, structured or unstructured, sacramental or non-sacramental, charismatic or liturgical, “contemporary” or “traditional”, liberal or conservative, high church or low church, evangelistic or educational; whether we use organ and choir, or praise band and screens, or even no music at all, just silence and meditation; whatever language and whichever Bible translation are used; and with any amount of shading within those categories; there are many ways to worship.

I will leave you to make up your own mind where I fit into that spectrum, if you haven't already done so. In the meantime, we all agree that of course, congregations can worship any in way that pleases them. We will just go on worshipping in the way that pleases God.

And so to Isaiah's vision of the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lofty, with the hem of his robe filling the temple, and strange, other-wordly creatures hovering above and calling to one another, and the very structure of the building trembling, and smoke billowing around.

It is at once glorious and powerful, awesome and mysterious, terrifying and reassuring. It is a vision of the otherness of the almighty God, the separateness of the heavenly Ruler, the greatness of the divine character. It is a vision of something far above and beyond and outside anything that we

might ever encounter here on earth. It is a vision limited only by what the human soul can take in, of what it must be like to stand in the presence of the One who is, in the words of Isaiah 40 that we read a couple of weeks ago, the everlasting God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. It gives us a glimpse of what it must be like to come face to face with the God of power and might, of holiness and righteousness and truth.

In that situation, I can't help thinking that there are only two appropriate responses for foolish, fallen humankind to make. The first is found in the words of the hymn we will sing in a few minutes: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand . . ."

The other is the response that Isaiah made, when he cried out: *'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!'* Isaiah 6:5.

But of course, that is not the end of the vision. It continues with the seraph flying down to Isaiah with a burning coal and touching his lips and declaring that his guilt has departed and his sin has been blotted out.

Which is a nice segue into our Gospel text for this morning. St John opens his Gospel account with elevated, high-flown and high-flying language similar to the language we read in Isaiah 6. It speaks of the Word that was in the beginning; the Word that was with God and was God; the creative Word through whom all things came into being; the Word in whom was the life that is the light of all people. Elevated, high-flown, high-flying language indeed.

But John goes on to speak of that very same Word becoming flesh and living among us, and revealing his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, the glory that is full of grace and truth.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we find ourselves between two poles. On the one hand, our faith is in the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the God of power and might, of holiness and righteousness and truth. And that has implications for the way we worship, and the language we use in worship, and the manner in which we address God and talk about God.

But as followers of Jesus Christ, our faith is also in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Word of light and life and grace and truth, the One who, in the words of John 1:12, gives to all who receive him, who believe in his name, power to become children of God. And that too has implications for the way we worship, and the language we use in worship, and the manner in which we address God and talk about God.

And implications for the manner in which we respond. Isaiah's vision ends with a call to action: *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!'* Isaiah 6:8.

Note the flow, the progression through the stages of the vision. First there is a sense of the awesomeness of God, Then there is a sense of human sinfulness; then an act of forgiveness and restoration. Then there is a call to service. And finally there is a response.

These have been the stages of worship in the Jewish and the Christian traditions ever since. They are reflected in the stages of worship here in New St James Sunday by Sunday. And they are reflected in our mission statement here in New St James: worshipping God, the Creator, the Ruler, our heavenly Father; following Christ, who offers forgiveness and peace with God to any who will follow him; serving others, by showing them the love that we have received through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

In the end, whatever form our worship takes, and wherever we stand on the spectrum of worship styles, it is these things that transform human words and actions into worship worthy of being offered to God.

Oh, and one more thing. The Lord's Table. Isaiah's vision was a solitary thing. It was between him and the Lord whom he saw high and lifted up. He made his own personal, private, individual response when the call came for someone to be sent.

John does not make the statement explicitly, but right at the start of his

account of the Gospel, we see traces of something that is an essential part of our faith. Think about what John says: all things came into being through him; the life was the light of all people; the Word became flesh and lived among us; we have seen his glory.

At the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is something that goes beyond the personal, the private, the individual, something that crosses into the corporate, the communal, what St Paul talks about as the body with many parts.

Which brings us to the Lord's Table, and the Sacrament of our Lord's Supper. We come here as individuals. We take the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation. We become one community, one fellowship, one body. And when the call comes, *'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'* then we reply, 'Here we are; send us!'