

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; Luke 5: 1 – 11 Newtonbrook United Church February 7, 2010  
**Called to Worship God**; a sermon by Rev. Allan Baker

In both of the scripture readings this morning people are being “called” by God. Isaiah is being called to be a prophet; the author of the Gospel According to Luke tells a story of Jesus calling his first disciples who, according to Fred Craddock, “follow a transcendent, compelling Christ.”<sup>1</sup> These stories naturally raise the question for us as to what we are being “called” to do with our lives.

One of the benefits of our faith is that we do have a collective response to this question. In the New Creed we affirm the all of us are “called” to be the church. That is why we are here this morning. We are church.

As a part of our call to be the church we say, more specifically, that we are called to celebrate God’s presence – that is to say, we are called to worship God – the God who is with us all along life’s journey; a constant companion; and yet a God who is awesome and remote; a God who is both immanent and transcendent; a God who is creating and who has created this wonderful world for us to live in. We are called to worship.

That term worship has many different meanings; many different hopes and forms for the people of the church of Jesus Christ. Worship is often what keeps the Body of Christ from being more unified in this world. Different communities have different ideas about what worship is, and what it ought to be. Marva Dawn once described conflicts over worship as, “*a universal ecclesial plague.*”<sup>2</sup>

Worship in the United Church of Canada has been going through a process of constant change over our 85 years as a young church. When I was a child attending Anderson United Church we began worship every Sunday morning by singing the same song. It is # 315 in Voices United – Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.

For those of the Methodist tradition, Charles Wesley’s “O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing”, written in 1739, was the proper opening hymn. For Methodists, worship wasn’t worship without the proper opening hymn.

In our United Church our changing worship has also gone through a period when we published books of prayers, Psalms and other materials for worship so that everyone across our national church would have the same resources available. This green book will be familiar to some of you and if Newtonbrook is similar to other congregations, there is a stash of these hidden somewhere in the building. The Green Book was the second worship book – the first was published in 1932.

The authors of the Green Book recognized the diversity that was present in the United Church, and our congregational freedom to worship God in the manner agreed upon by the local congregation. They stated that the Green Book would be a resource.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke, by Fred Craddock, page 69 (Interpretation series)

<sup>2</sup> Marva Dawn, A Royal “Waste” of Time, page 4

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; Luke 5: 1 – 11 Newtonbrook United Church February 7, 2010  
**Called to Worship God;** a sermon by Rev. Allan Baker

*“These helps, together with the long tradition of free prayer, the Bible, and the hymn book will, it is hoped, make possible the expression of devotion to God in a manner helpful to each congregation of our church.”<sup>3</sup>*

The hymn books that we have used for worship in the United Church of Canada have also changed, over time. The Hymnal was published in 1930; The Hymn Book in 1971; followed by Songs for a Gospel People in 1987 and Voices United in 1996. Now we have More Voices, adding to our tradition of growing diversity in music.

Last week I was in conversation with a friend – a retired clergyperson. My friend described worship at their monthly Presbytery meeting. Apparently there was a large amount of music in that worship from More Voices. My friend attends a congregation that has a reputation for strong classical music, and that is the reason why my friend worships there. *“Allan, he said, what’s our church coming to?”*

Our church is coming to the same thing that it has been coming to over its 85 years of life. This is a church of diversity, a church of faith, and a church of change. In our United Church, we also make a deliberate attempt to be relevant to the world that surrounds us.

Our anniversary speaker last November, the Rev. Michael Blair, challenged us to be aware of the fact that society is changing and our worship styles need to change as well.

A former Professor of Worship at Emmanuel College, David Newman, wrote:

*“it is by no means self evident for many people in the present age that Christian worship has any relevance whatever. People demonstrate their indifference to what is going on in the church by not attending worship.”<sup>4</sup>*

But let us not get caught up in the destructive debate of style over substance. Congregations have done so, as it is well documented in Thomas Long’s book called, Beyond The Worship Wars. Yes, congregations have one to war over changes in worship – it is that important to all of us.

Let’s look at what we say we are “called” to do – worship.

*“Worship invites us to adopt a different attitude to ourselves and to the world in which we live, one that includes “wonder, love and praise.”<sup>5</sup> (Newman)*

That could be the reason why, back in Anderson United, as a community of struggling farmers, we sang:

*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.*

---

<sup>3</sup> Service Book, 1969, page 36

<sup>4</sup> David Newman, Worship as Praise and Empowerment, page 13

<sup>5</sup> David Newman, Worship as Praise and Empowerment, page 116

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; Luke 5: 1 – 11 Newtonbrook United Church February 7, 2010  
**Called to Worship God;** a sermon by Rev. Allan Baker

Worship at Anderson United began with an acknowledgement that God is the first reality in worship. We are not here for ourselves – we are here to offer our praise and thanksgiving. It wasn't about us – worship is about God.

Evelyn Underhill once defined worship as, *“the response of the creature to the eternal”*<sup>6</sup>.

Marva Dawn has written a book about worship and her subtitle is: *The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. She writes that the purpose of worship is, *“not to gain numbers nor for our churches to be seen as successful. Rather, the entire reason for worship is that God deserves it.”*<sup>7</sup>

Her book is called, A Royal “Waste” of Time.

She says that she chose that title because, in the eyes of the society that surrounds us, worship is a waste of time. It doesn't accomplish anything – and we are certainly surrounded by an ethic that says anything useful has value because it accomplishes something. She says worship is a “Royal” waste of time because in worship we participate in the Kingdom of God. God has “called” us to be a part of this Kingdom, and we have responded.<sup>8</sup> Through our baptism as Christians we are born into this Kingdom.

In a world where human achievement is celebrated continuously, God is often left out. Many seem to have lost that sense of AWE that Isaiah encountered in the temple. It is our role to help the world recover that awesomeness.

*“Worship is a royal waste of time that spirals into a passion for living as Christians and back into more passionate worship. It is totally irrelevant, not efficient, not powerful, not spectacular, not productive, sometimes not even satisfying to us. It is also the only hope for changing the world.”*<sup>9</sup> (Dawn)

David Newman wrote about worship as, “Praise and Empowerment.” In worship we praise God for the gift of life, for the blessings of life, and we are empowered through worship to go out into the world to bring about God's reign of peace and justice. He wrote, *“Every sermon should call for a change of life and issue in an invitation to accept that new option for oneself.”*<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by James F. White in Introduction to Christian Worship, page 19

<sup>7</sup> Marva Dawn, A Royal “Waste” of Time, page 1

<sup>8</sup> Marva Dawn, A Royal “waste” of Time, page 14

<sup>9</sup> Marva Dawn, A Royal Waste of Time, page 17

<sup>10</sup> David Newman, Worship as Praise and Empowerment, page 135

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; Luke 5: 1 – 11 Newtonbrook United Church February 7, 2010  
**Called to Worship God**; a sermon by Rev. Allan Baker

Worship will change the world, because it changes us. Worship has the power to change us because in worship we acknowledge that we are not the centre of the universe; we are not the reason the world exists; we are God's people who, like Isaiah and the disciples of Jesus, are called to be a part of the Kingdom. Marva Dawn calls this "being church for the world."

In worship we can become like Simon Peter watching a bountiful catch of fish, we recognize that God is at work among us, providing all that is needed for life – in contrast to the false doctrine of scarcity that is promoted by the powers of Empire. Worship can provide us with new views of the world, in all of its ambiguities, and all of its beauty.

We come to worship the God who loves us, even with all of our human frailties, because this God has called us to be partners in building the world of God's dreams. We come to worship to be part of a community that gathers to recognize that we are a small thread in a universal tapestry that includes God – and even our thread matters to God. We are an important thread that is helping to accomplish the weaving of this world into a picture that is the world of God's dreams.

Maybe the Methodists had it right when they sang that old Wesleyan hymn:

*My gracious Master and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread thro' all the earth abroad  
The honours of your name<sup>11</sup>*

Yes indeed, **praise and empowerment** !

HYMN # 390 – How Great the Mystery of Faith

For Reflection:

- 1) Why would worship styles change over time?
- 2) If worship is to be God-centred, what do we receive?

---

<sup>11</sup> O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing, verse 5