

Why Are You Here?

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

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Isaiah 6:1–8

Romans 8:12–17

A bit more than 27 years ago, a singer by the name of David Byrne wrote lyrics to a song that was then recorded by his band, Talking Heads, and which became famous, even historic, well, as much as 1980's rock and roll *slash* "new wave" songs can be historic.

That song, "Once in a Lifetime," is about consumerism and existential despair and the false image many present of themselves.

And it starts with Byrne not so much singing as talking, even preaching, somewhat like this:

*And you may find yourself
living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself
in another part of the world
And you may find yourself
behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself
in a beautiful house,
with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself,
"Well ... how did I get here?"*

I wonder if that is what Isaiah thought.

"How did I get here?"

More to the point, I wonder if he wondered this wondering:

"Why am I here?"



"Here," of course, was the temple, that holiest of holy places, where the God of Israel was thought in those days to be especially present. And why Isaiah was there, it doesn't exactly say, but we have very good reason to think that Isaiah was there in the temple that day because he was *supposed* to be there. As a priest, who served in the temple, he was on duty, assigned and scheduled to be there that day. He was required to be there. It was his responsibility to be there.

So it wasn't like he didn't know this place. It wasn't as if he had never been there before.

Most of us have known people who joke that if they ever set foot in a church or a temple, the walls would come crashing down. There are times when I see someone in church for a

funeral or a wedding, and I think, “Wow, doesn’t *he* look uncomfortable.” Because I’m pretty sure — I can just see it — that guy hasn’t set foot in a church since the last wedding or funeral he attended. And he’s worried — I can just see it — he fears that the walls might come falling down on him.

I want to go up to him and whisper “It’s okay; nothing’s gonna fall down; you’re supposed to be here.”

Well, that wasn’t the case for Isaiah. He had been there — often —

 this place of worship and devotion,
 this place of tradition and dedication,
 this place of familiar responsibility.

He knew this place, very well. At least, he thought he did.

Had it become too familiar? Was he so used to this place that he had forgotten what it really was, and what was supposed to happen there? When he went in there, was he just going through the motions?

If so, I can’t blame him. He went to the temple often, and so he got used to it. After all, it was probably the same old thing, day in and day out —

 a few prayers,
 a few songs,
 some readings,
 some rituals,
 some small talk in the fellowship hall.

Eventually, he’d go home: to put his feet up, to have something to eat, to catch the game on TV, and his wife would ask, “so how was work today, dear?” and he would answer, “Oh you know, same old same old, nothing special.”

Nothing special.

But this day was special. This day was different. Because on this day, God *made* it different. Into this place that for Isaiah had become familiar, all too familiar, God strode in and filled it with divine glory and holiness.

What did Isaiah see?

He saw the Lord, high and lifted up.

What did Isaiah hear?

He heard the cries of angels, calling to each other

Qadosh, qadosh, qadosh
adonai tsebaoth,
mehlo kol ha-aretz kehvodoh.

“Holy, holy, holy
is the LORD of hosts,
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

What did Isaiah feel?

He felt the shaking of the temple pillars.

He felt the shouts of the angels in his bones.

He felt *lost*.

Again, I can’t blame him. Here Isaiah encountered God, directly, and what he knew in that moment was the terrifying contrast between God and Isaiah:

the holy against the unholy;
the pure against the corrupt;
the true against the false;
the dependable against the weak;
the creator against the creature;
the everlasting against the fleeting.

This is what Isaiah 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!”*

Truer words would be hard to find:

truer to himself,
truer to this situation,
truer to God.

Because the gulf between who *God* is and who *Isaiah* was had never been so clear to Isaiah as in that moment.

This was a real “why am I here” moment.

Yes, “Why am I here?” For Isaiah, it would be “Why am *I* here”:

I, who am by no means holy,
I, who treat God as an idea,
I, who worship God as if this were just a job?

And it would also be “Why am I *here*,” in the presence of God:

not someplace familiar,
not someplace safe,
not in a space under my control,
not by my choice,
not because I seek God,
but because God has sought me,
and found me,
and chosen me?

Why am I *here*?



Isn't that the question for all of us, the question each of us might ask: “Why am I here?” I, who am not holy, why am I here standing — or sitting — before the Holy One?

So, let's get to it. Why *are* you here? I'm really serious about this. I really want you to consider this question, to probe it in the depths of your hearts, to hold it up alongside

your actions,
your attitudes,
your passions.

Why are you here?

Is it out of obligation?
Is it because you have responsibilities?
Is it so you won't feel guilty?

Why are you here?

Is it a choice you made?
Is it a lifestyle you picked?

Why are you here?

Is it to show that you are a good person?
Is it to make a good impression?

Why are you here?

For encouragement?
For entertainment?
For absolution?

Why are you here?

To forget?
To hide?

Isaiah reminds me that there are lots of bad reasons most all of us have for being here, but when it comes down to it, finally we are here because of God. That is why we are here:

to focus on God,
to celebrate what God has done,
to be attentive to what God is doing,
to look forward in hope to what God will do.

Isaiah reminds me that God is both the cause and the purpose for our being here. God brought us here. And to focus on God is why we are here.

Because we gather for worship:

not to play,
not to be entertained.

For worship.

I tell you, something is supposed to *happen* at worship.

And it's not a talent show.
It's not a concert.
It's not a lecture series.
It's not a patriotic celebration.
It's not a political rally.
It's not a glorification of the power of the human spirit.
It's not a focus on the family.

No, worship truly is

an encounter with God
initiated by God
eagerly sought by those who honor God.

And if it ever is not, then something is seriously wrong.
The object of worship

is not ourselves,
nor our love for one another,
nor our communities,
nor our country.

No. We worship God.



We gather because God bridges the distance:

between us and God,
between human failure and divine perfection,
between our accomplishments and our intentions,
between reality and perception.

God bridges the distance by creating us, beautiful and blessed even in our frailty and incompleteness.

God bridges the distance by forgiving us and healing us through the sacrifice of the Son of God.

God bridges the distance by lifting us up through the action of God's own Spirit into the Holy of Holies where our praise may join that of the angels. For we

have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . ."

My friends, God — who in God's innermost self is this loving dynamic of three-in-one and one-in-three — is all about bridge building.

Yes, God — who is always and ever the dynamic love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is eternally active in God's own work of creating, redeeming, and making holy — God builds bridges.

And how different that is from us.
For we are more inclined to build fences and walls and bombs rather than bridges.
We so often prefer to stay isolated:

from neighbors;
from strangers;
from people of other races
or religions
or nations
or political persuasions
or sexual orientations.

But God builds bridges.

We might find ourselves, contrary to our best interests and the good of our souls, veering toward isolating ourselves from those we most love.

Even from ourselves.

Even from God.

But God builds bridges.

Because God is holy.

And so God builds bridges.

God is pure.

So God builds bridges.

God creates and redeems and sustains.

So God builds bridges.

God made us to be in community; God forgives us and makes us new so we can be in community; God makes us holy so we can be in community: with God, and with each other.

God builds bridges, and remakes us to be bridge-builders as well, those who share in the Triune God's work of bridge-building and community-forming, of grace and peace and reconciliation, of a holiness that is seen not just in the heart but out in the open, even in society.

This is why we are here, to worship God, who exists from eternity to eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we are here because this same God has bridged the gap, drawing us into relationship with God and with each other.

And so we worship God.



Yet it seems to me that we often think that this is all about our choice.

We get out of bed, or not;
we go to church, or not;
we sing and pray, or not;
we pay attention, ...or not —

all because of what *we* choose.

And sure, choice is part of it. As Paul says, we “did not receive a spirit of slavery ... but a spirit of adoption.” We are not slaves but heirs. We are not robots, but beloved creatures who think and love and choose.

But let’s not think we’re the only ones who have a choice. God has a choice here, too! And God chooses to love us. God chooses to build bridges. God chooses to bridge the gap

between love and indifference,
between holiness and helplessness,
between purity and apathy.

Ah, yes, there it is: apathy. To be honest with you, I feel among us a persistent and deep apathy when it comes to God and the things of God.

Why is that? I don’t know. I suspect none of us know for sure. And I can confess that I am not immune to it. I, too see a tendency toward apathy in my heart, a subtle yet weighty “Why bother?” strongest, perhaps, as I anticipate climbing into this pulpit on Sunday morning to deliver words that always seem to taunt the inadequacy of my living and that I am uncertain are ever really heard.

Perhaps it’s a form of self-protection, as I just want to get away from the pain of this world,

in which students are shot at school,
and babies are killed by parents,
and mothers are murdered by boyfriends,
and toddlers are torn out of their mommas’ arms by agents of the state,
and veterans are blocked from receiving the medical treatment they need,
and politicians cheat or equivocate or lie,
and religious leaders defend them and absolve them.

“I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips....”

Maybe the self-protection is rather against God, as if I really could. Because God just won’t leave me alone. I feel God to be, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “The Hound of Heaven.” I feel the ever blessing and ever convicting presence of God that is always telling me that I am loved and lovely yet I have yet to conform to this very love and loveliness. And I sometimes want, but not really, to be left alone. My apathy is the denial of God and the denial of who God makes me to be.

I’m not as certain of this as I once was. But I suspect that there may be no greater cure for spiritual apathy than focusing often in prayer on the truth that God is so holy, so just and good and pure, and yet this very God has chosen to create me, to forgive me, to draw me far closer to God than I under my own power ever could.



This is the heart of things:

that our joy lies not in our choice but in God’s choice,
that our security lies not in our strength but in God’s strength,
that our future is more than what we make of it,

because it rests in the hands of God,
who creates, redeems, and sustains us,
who —
 as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 from beginning to end,
is love.

My friends, this is why we are here: to worship and serve this God whose love builds bridges, draws us into community, and reforms us for a life of holy service.
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.