



“A Life of Praise” **February 21, 2021**

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Psalm 100

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Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing. Worshiping is something we do every week, at least in the way we typically think about worship as a public worship *service*. But worship is actually much more encompassing than that. Over the next several minutes, we’ll consider how and why we worship, and with God’s help, come to a deeper understanding of worship as a key practice of faithful discipleship, the first of our five practices.

It first will be helpful to define worship. What exactly is worship and why do we do it? A broadly standard definition of worship is a set of actions by which people express and reaffirm their devotional stance toward, and relationship to, a deity. To put it more simply, worship is what people do to acknowledge and praise whatever “god” they serve. Regardless of religious affiliation, including none at all, we all worship *something* or *someone* – an object, an idea, or a person. As Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody.”

In the Christian faith, worship is how we express praise and adoration to God through Christ and seek God’s help in our lives. We experience God in three aspects or “persons:” – as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through the Father, or Parent, we know God as authoritative but compassionate, the God of our ancestors revealed in scripture, active in human affairs and yet above them. Through the Son, we know God in the human form of Jesus, who emptied himself of power and privilege, healed and taught, suffered and died and rose again to point us to God’s reign and the hope of new life. Through the Spirit, we know God as the indwelling presence that brings both comfort and conviction, enlivening us to will and to work for the calling God places on our lives. We worship God in all three aspects, though we specifically put Christ at the center, celebrating God’s saving action through him.

Worship as we understand it involves both intention and action. Who or what is worthy of our praise and devotion? We make an intentional choice by identifying as followers of Christ. But we must also translate that intention into action, by adopting regular practices that shape us into committed disciples. We structure our lives to practice what we claim to believe.

We are in the final year of a five-year vision at Church of the Saviour. This year’s theme is **Lifelong Worship**, learning to see everything we do as an act of worship. We set aside time for rituals that focus our attention on God’s presence. But worship is also expressed in the way we carry ourselves *outside* of those rituals: at work, at school, walking the dog, going to the grocery store, watering the plants, checking on loved ones and friends.

A passage of scripture we love that speaks specifically to this idea of lifelong worship is Eugene Peterson’s translation of Romans 12:1-2. I can almost picture Paul sitting around a table in a house church encouraging people to grow in their faithfulness. Paul says to them:

Here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for [God]. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what [God] wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (Romans 12:1-2, MSG)

Worship impacts our lives in specific, concrete ways. First of all, it helps us *remember*. In worship, we retell the story of our relationship with God through scripture, song, prayer, and proclamation. We do this over and over because, in the words of Bishop Gregory Vaughn Palmer, “human beings have a tendency to forget.” Without regular worship, it's too easy for us to lose sight of our place in God's story. We get distracted by daily living and our world begins to shrink. We reduce life to our immediate surroundings: things we do, people we interact with, stories that surround us. Worship reminds us that we are part of something bigger: God's story. We are reminded that we are incomplete without God and one another, that we are redeemed from sin by God's love in Christ, and that we are invited to be part of God's saving action in the world. As the old hymn goes, “I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.” We tell the stories over and over again to help us remember.

Worship *reorients us* toward God and away from ourselves. I said a moment ago that, without worship, our world shrinks to what is in our immediate field of vision. There's a danger in this diminished view of the world: it leads us to focus on ourselves as the center of the story. Western society is distinctly *anthropocentric*, a way of thinking that says humans are of central importance. In that mindset, everything around us is for human benefit and derives its value from its usefulness to humans. We're witnessing the disastrous effects of that attitude on our environment. At the individual level, *egocentrism* makes everything and everyone valuable only to the extent that they are useful *to us*, which is also disastrous. Jesus spent a great deal of time teaching us to stop treating each other as objects, to reorient us away from self and toward God and others. One of the most important lessons we can learn from worship is this: God is God and I am not. As the psalmist put it, “Know that the Lord is God; it is God that made us, not we ourselves” (Psalm 100:3). At the same time, we have the assurance of God's grace and compassion. “As a parent has compassion for their children, so God is compassionate toward us. For God knows how we were made, and remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13-14).

Thirdly, worship is a *rehearsal* for life in the kingdom of God. We want the expressions we use in worship to be relevant to daily life. Our prayers focus on the lived realities of our world. I strive for my sermons to have practical application. But worship involves more than reflecting life as we know it. It is *transcendent*, calling us to a higher plane, the realm of true holiness. We aspire to that ideal, knowing we will fall short of it in this life. Worship points us heavenward, most clearly in the ancient communion prayer we call *The Great Thanksgiving*. We repeat the angelic chorus, “Holy, holy, holy” found in Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8. We declare the holy mystery that “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” And we ask for unity in Spirit “until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at the heavenly banquet.”

Worship is both personal and public. Both are essential to a life of faithful discipleship. On a personal level, we want to spend time every day with God. The best way to do that is to make prayer a regular part of your day. Last week, I mentioned that people often tell me that they're not very good at praying. The first disciples didn't think they were very good at praying, either. So, they asked Jesus, “Teach us to pray.” Jesus said they should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, holy is your name. Bring your kingdom here so that your will is done on earth the same as it is in heaven. We look to you for what we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we should forgive those who wrong us. And help us to resist temptation and the lures of evil. (Matthew 6:9-13, my paraphrase)

We call that The Lord's Prayer and we say it together every Sunday and other days in-between (though we use loftier language than I just did). It's a good prayer. A *really* good prayer. But I don't think Jesus meant for us to memorize those exact words and repeat them over and over again (though I don't think he minds when we do). Rather, his prayer was a *model* for us to follow. Start with praise, remembering and honoring God. Work for God's will and God's way, not our own. Be grateful for today's blessings instead of being anxious about tomorrow. Seek forgiveness, but remember to forgive others, too. And ask for the strength to avoid temptation and sin. That's it. Our words don't have to be fancy. God knows our hearts.

The simplest prayers are often the best. Prayer can be simply, “Thank you, God.” We can all do that, can't we? It's amazing how a moment of gratitude can change our entire posture. What if, instead of starting the morning thinking of everything that needs to be done or consuming the news, we began by thanking God for the day? What if,

instead of grabbing an energy bar on the way out the door or absent-mindedly picking at a sandwich at our desk, we stopped to thank God for the food we have? What if each night, instead of thinking what we left undone or what we'd like to do over, we thanked God for the blessing of the day we had and the rest ahead of us? I know when I pray, my perspective changes. So I encourage you to pray five times a day: when you wake up, before breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and then before you go to bed at night. Even if it's just a simple, "Thank you, God," that practice will change you.

Personal acts of worship shape our walk with God, but we also need times to gather as a faith community. One of the things we've learned over the last year is how much we miss by not being able to gather as a church to worship together. I'm grateful for the technology that allows us to stay connected through live streaming, though I know it's a poor substitute for human connection and human touch. I eagerly await the time we can safely gather again.

When we worship together, we express ourselves to God in ways we cannot on our own. You may have heard the quotation, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." That is certainly true of worship. We bring our individual experiences, gifts, and expressions, but together we become something more. There is a different kind of energy that comes when we worship God collectively through praise, prayer, and song. Actually, song is a perfect example. None of us on our own could present a stirring anthem or a modern song of praise. That's why we have choirs and a worship band, to make music we cannot on our own. When we sing a hymn or a modern worship song, the combination of our voices can transport us to new heights of praise or outpourings of lament. This past Christmas Eve, as 100+ hale and hardy folks gathered on the front lawn of Church of the Saviour, we sang "Silent Night" together in the snow, without instruments. None of us who was there will soon forget that experience.

Worshipping together shapes our identity as a community of faith as we lift our hearts and our voices, transcendence derived from common experience. We grow closer to God and to one another when we pray together for healing and hope, when we make music, when we affirm our faith, when we receive the bread and cup. We encourage one another. We pray for one another. We mourn together. We become the voice for one another when we cannot find our own voice or words adequate to express what we feel.

Corporate worship is also an act of resistance. Setting aside time to be in God's presence and to rest doesn't seem like a productive activity. Creating awe-inspiring spaces with a singular purpose seems an unnecessary extravagance. Worship is a resounding *No* to the priorities of productivity, profit, and merit. At the same time, worship is God's resounding *Yes* in the face of fear, hatred, and doubt. When we worship on Ash Wednesday, instead of running from death or denying it, we acknowledge our mortality and put our trust in God's mercy. When we worship at Christmas, we proclaim Emmanuel – God with us, not conspicuous consumption or love measured by the number of gifts under the tree. When we meet week after week, following the cycle of the Christian year, we mark time with God's timeless promises and our place in God's story. And so, we covenant to worship together every chance we get, which for us means every Sunday we're not sick, traveling, or working. With the ever-present resource of live-streamed worship and video archives, we need not miss even for those reasons.

Worship is only the first of our five practices, but it is the foundation on which a life of faith is built. Be intentional about making time to worship on your own and in community. Practice daily prayer, and worship as part of the faith community – online while we must and in-person when we can. But remember that worship is more than just an hour a week or a set-aside ritual; *life itself* is an act of worship. By bringing both intentionality and practice, worship can become a habit that shapes our identity, our "walking-around life." Through worship, we remember who we are and our relationship with God who gives us life, redeems us from sin, and calls us to world-transforming ministry. Thanks be to God. Amen.