



“Practicing Worship”

Psalm 148:7-14; Luke 4:5-8

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First Sunday in Lent

It was the lowest time of my adult life. I was unemployed with a wife and three children. We'd decided to leave the warmth of a nurturing congregation to enter the unknown world of doctoral studies. The hypercompetitive harshness of graduate school combined with economic fears left me discouraged, distressed and doubtful we'd made the right decision.

On a Sunday morning in early September, on the recommendation of old college friends, we attended worship at the historic Walnut Street Baptist Church in downtown Louisville. The church was filled with well-dressed, apparently successful worshippers. Our little family sat in the balcony opposite a grand circular stained glass window. I was feeling small, insignificant, useless and likely a failure.

At 11:00 sharp, the two doors flanking the chancel at the front of the sanctuary opened and the choir decked in gorgeous gold robes with crimson trim began to process in. The processional went on and on until 100 or more choir members took their place in the loft.

When the ministers were in their places, the great pipe organ sounded a dramatic introduction to the Doxology and the large congregation rose as one and began to sing. I joined my voice to that grand chorus and it seemed I entered into something larger and grander than myself or my life. It seemed larger than that congregation. I sensed I was joining my voice to the voice of the whole church in history and around the world.

As I sang, perhaps because of our singing, I experienced something else larger than myself. My heart rose up with the music and expanded with joy that didn't seem to make sense given what I brought to worship that day. Unexpectedly, I received strength for the journey. God met me at the point of my need - in worship in a community of faith.

I don't remember anything else about that service but I will never forget that day. God met me at the point of my need - in a community of faith. That moment created a small turning point in my life.

Every Sunday, all over the world, hundreds of millions of people take their place in churches large and small bringing with them all the stuff of their lives, both good and bad. They, with us, lift their voices in song, join us in prayer, hear a word from the Lord and join us at the Lord's Table.

Each time, if we are paying attention, we enter into something larger than ourselves and our world of experience. We join forces with God's people everywhere in an experience with the potential to be grander than ordinary human endeavors. We meet at the intersection of time and eternity where good things are bound to happen - if we are paying attention.

Plymouth Church
Sermon 1 March 09

You don't have to be in a grand church to encounter God either. Only a few Sundays before that day in Louisville, I'd led worship in a humble small town church filled with ordinary people. The interior walls of the church were pink. It seems my predecessor came across pink paint on sale. The music was weak at best. The little reed organ was wheezing its last notes. Yet, the congregation came eagerly and expectantly and we seldom left that room disappointed. We met God there – together.

We call it worship. Worship is the common characteristic of all human religion. Humans, it seems, will worship something or someone. The religious question is what God we decide to worship.

Christians worship the God revealed in Holy Scripture. The worship of God stands at the center of the Christian experience. Despite the remarkable variety that is part of the Christian family, this one thing we do regularly and faithfully.

Everywhere and in all time, we humans find ways of tending to our souls. We seek to satisfy the hungers of the heart with something or someone outside of ourselves. Most humans long to experience transcendence, some taste of the divine. That longing is acute and growing in our time.

The story of the Bible is one stream of that larger human narrative. The earliest stories in Genesis feature altars where people sought a relationship with God. Israel, God's covenant people, centered their national life in the Temple in Jerusalem, a sacred place – a place to meet God, sing songs of praise, bring offerings, pray and ask God for help for the journey of life.

Our Scripture Lessons are classic texts on worship. Psalm 148 is one of many Psalms of Israel that exhort everything in the created universe, especially us, to worship God the creator. The Gospel Lesson is part of the narrative of Jesus' Temptation (a story heard in the whole church this first Sunday of Lent). One of the temptations was the Tempter's desire for Jesus to worship false gods. Jesus' response was simple. He quoted a biblical text, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."

In another spot (John 4), Jesus taught that through all history God is seeking people to worship God. Jesus claimed God sent him on a special mission to seek people to worship God. Then and now, Jesus calls us to become part of a living community of faith where time and eternity meet on a regular basis.

Over the centuries, Christians have developed forms of worship with rituals, traditions and architecture to assist God's people to encounter God in worship. In fact, the variety of expressions of worship is astonishing. Many Christians worship God in "high" architectural buildings, great pipe organs, grand classical choral music and traditional hymns, clergy in colorful vestments, incense and scripted worship. All the senses are asked to participate. Such services speak of beauty, grace, historical roots, dignity and a God high, lifted up and majestic.

Some worship is much less formal and grand. In simple rooms, singing gospel songs, folk or rock music accompanied by piano or guitar band, the order of service is not important, responses are spontaneous and the point seems to enjoy the experience. These services are expressive not reflective, and speak of informality, intimacy, spiritual energy, power and joy. God seems a nearby friend.

Despite our diverse forms, similarity lies just beneath the surface. We are doing the same things differently. We sing, pray, hear and come to a common table. We just do it in different ways.

More importantly, at the center of it all, Christian worship in all its variety is a common celebration of the majesty, glory and ultimate worth of God our creator. This God-

centered practice has a most practical consequence; we come also to seek God's help and God's blessing for our journey.

Christian worship is based on a remarkable claim. The church teaches and we believe that when we worship Christ the Lord is among us. Worship is, as a consequence, the intersection of time and eternity, our lives and the life of God.

That's why the great theologian, Karl Barth writes,

The worship of God is the most important, momentous and majestic thing can take place on earth because its primary content is not the work of man but it is the work of God.

Again, the point is quite practical. Worship has powerful consequences. Our Reformed Tradition lifts up the glory of God as the single most important issue in the universe – and in our lives and in the church. In our worship, as Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer, we "hallow" or lift high God's name. We sing, pray and listen in order to make God great – because God is great.

That theme is far more than a theological principle. It has profound practical consequences. The greater the God we worship the larger our experience of that God in worship – and the greater impact God will have on our day to day lives. God wants it that way. The creator of the universe, the redeemer of the world, the sustainer of all that is, wants to life in loving partnership with us. Standing at the very center of the Christian faith is the notion that God became one of us, is invested in our lives and promises to be with us no matter what.

The real question for all of us, in life and in worship is this: is our God too small?

How, then, do we encounter a God large enough for our lives – for the needs of this world? The standard answer is simple and profound. God is best encountered in the worship of a living community faith. It is here, in the congregation, that Jesus promises to meet us each Lord's Day. There is something about the accumulated faith and experience of a community in the presence of the living Christ that is powerful. The community of faith "works." It does something to our interior life.

Common experiences are creative and formative. Singing together, praying, listening, coming to the Lord's table – and simple conversations at coffee hour – all of it changes the interior of our lives. Worship makes God great and re-forms us at the same time.

Each time we meet here for worship we enter something much larger, grander and more glorious than ourselves. We enter an historical stream that stretches all the way back to the creation. We join God's people in all of time lifting voice and heart to God. At the same time, we join the voices of the church all around the world. Our songs, prayers and fellowship meet the voices of the universal church in a grand sound that, according to Scripture, makes God very glad. God hears the voices of his dearly loved children lifted up in love, praise and submission. It is very good and quite transforming.

Worship doesn't belong to us; it is a gift from the rich treasure of the whole church. When received and entered into, worship takes us beyond ourselves, connects us to time and to eternity. It's a big deal!

That's why a man I know can remember the place he was sitting in the balcony one Sunday morning. He was struggling with addiction to alcohol and knew he was helpless on his own. He wandered into church and met God in the worship of a living congregation. With lots of help from God, the church and AA, he's been sober since.

A woman came to that same congregation deeply wounded by a recent divorce, on her own and frightened. She, too, vividly remembers how at the very point of her need, God met her in a congregation bowed down in worship.

Plymouth Church
Sermon 1 March 09

Another woman, tired of the single lifestyle and too many evenings spent in bars, listened to a friend's recommendation and came to church one Sunday. The way she put it is this, "I entered the door and ran into a wall of God's grace." She's never been the same.

The worship of God is properly a counter-cultural experience. It's different from anything else in our lives and it's supposed to be. Its purpose is equally counter-cultural, making us less of what we are and more what God wants us to be.

Where else in the world do people come and sing together and sing to a God who cannot be seen? Where else do large groups of people bow in prayer together and ask God to change the world and themselves? And where, except in church, do people sit still for a monologue drawn from ancient texts and pointed at their hearts, souls and minds?

We engage in this odd practice because we know something. We know life is not what it's supposed to be and we aren't what we're designed to be either. We come here for help. We worship because we long for something larger than ourselves. We ache to encounter transcendence. We sing, pray and listen because our interior selves need reform.

But – and here's a large issue – but, to meet God here and for God to shape our souls, we must enter into the experience and the form in which worship comes to us. If we resist the thing we're doing – or the way we're doing it – worship doesn't "work." To use a very unpopular word in the 21st century, worship requires our "submission" to our worship.

And it takes time and repetition to make God great and to change the shape of our lives. When the great pianist Ignace Jan Paderewski was in his 80s, he still practiced eight hours a day. An acquaintance asked him why he still practiced so diligently. After all, he was world famous and most people considered him the best pianist alive.

Paderewski answered, "I still practice diligently because I have the distinct impression I'm making progress."

It takes a lifetime to form a Christian. And it requires practice, practice, practice!

Amen.

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