

July 31, 2005
Isaiah 6:1-8, Revelation 4:1-11
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“A Little Bit of Heaven on Earth”

In her book, *Amazing Grace: a Vocabulary of Faith*, author Kathleen Norris says that worship is like home because it “is the place where they have to take you in. There is no one who is not welcome in God’s house... When people come together to worship, they come as God knows them, with their differences, their wildly various experiences and perspectives. And by some miracle, they sing, and listen, and pray as one.” (p.246)

Norris goes on to describe a frustrating week she spent at an educational conference on worship. The conference leaders had a grim determination to teach new forms of worship with new liturgies and hymns that ruled out any opportunity to experience the holy in the familiar hymns, prayers and liturgy of her experience. When she finally managed to get away, she found refuge in a worship service in a small Benedictine church “with a pleasingly motley crew” of worshippers. Norris writes, “The choir was large, lively, enthusiastic, and blessedly ragged. The homily was forgettable.” She found what she was looking for—true worship. Norris continues, “I wanted worship with room for the Holy Spirit, worship hospitable enough to welcome a confused soul such as myself. And there, among strangers, I found it: living worship...joy enough to briefly house a living God.” (p.250)

In our scripture lessons this morning we are given two visions of living worship—one on earth and one in heaven. In each experience there is “joy enough to briefly house a living God.”

The prophet Isaiah is carrying out his duties as a priest serving in the Jerusalem Temple. Isaiah has a vision of the Lord sitting upon the throne. Suddenly the Temple is filled with heavenly beings, mysterious smoke and voices sounding the praise of God. In the presence of the holy God, Isaiah is struck with his own sinfulness. In the vision from the book of Revelation, John is transported in the Spirit to the very throne room of God. Gathered around the throne are the 24 elders representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. The whole people of God are gathered before God. They join in eternal praise to God. As the winged creatures sing, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,” they cast their crowns before God.

Worship is the central act in the life of the church. To be a Christian is to be a creature who worships the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Worship is not intended to be a workshop about God but a moment in time in which we experience God. When we encounter God, we discover our own true selves. St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee, O Lord.” In the Hebrew, the word worship means service. Worship is our primary form of service to God. Frederick Beuchner has written:

Phrases like Worship Service or Service or Worship are tautologies. To worship God *means* to serve him. Basically there are two ways to do it.

One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done—run errands for him, carry messages for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do—sing songs for him, create beautiful things for him, give up things for him, tell him what’s on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love...unless there is an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful. (p. 122, *Wishful Thinking*)

You might call worship a holy waste of time! In worship we throw ourselves in glad abandon before God. Vital worship always reminds me of Jacob’s dream at Bethel when he saw a ladder reaching from earth to the throne of God in heaven. Angels were ascending and descending the ladder. Worship spans the distance between heaven and Earth and we find ourselves moving up and down the ladder between Earth and heaven. Worship is to be a little bit of heaven on Earth.

In worship we see ourselves and our world as they truly are. We see things from God’s point of view. Worship is our offering to God. It is not a performance offered by the preacher, the liturgists, the choir and the sound and light technicians. You have heard me paraphrase Kierkegaard in saying that worship is like a theater. Only all of us—preacher, congregation and choir—are on stage presenting our offering of praise and thanksgiving to God who is our audience of one. Worship is not something I do, but a present we give God together. If we are to meet God in worship, then we need minds and hearts that are open and turned to God’s network.

If corporate worship is the center of the congregation’s life, then all of us need to be engaged in corporate worship. Over the past few months I have reshaped our staff meeting schedule. I have told the entire staff, not just the ministerial staff, that the most important meeting each week is our 11 a.m. Tuesday chapel prayer service. If worship is the center of our lives, then it also needs to be at the center of how we think about our daily labor and service. At this service, we sing hymns of praise to God, we read scripture together and we pray for the particular needs and prayer concerns of the congregation, community and world. In that moment of worship, we find the strength to carry out our other forms of service throughout the week.

Over the past year, a Task Force on engaging children, youth and their families in worship has been hard at work. The Task Force has been studying how and where children and youth are currently engaged in corporate worship at Second. We have also looked at our traditions in Reformed worship, what other congregations are doing, the form of our current services and how we can equip the parents of children and youth to engage them more meaningfully in worship. We want our children and youth to participate in worship and have opportunities to join in the planning, preparation and leadership of worship. The goal of the Task Force is “to promote an atmosphere in our church community that fosters the spiritual formation and lifelong discipleship of our children and youth through their participation in worship.” At an early age, our children

and youth need to learn about worship through experiencing worship with their families and the congregation. Worship is something we learn to value and to do well by practice.

One Sunday, when I was sitting in the congregation for one of the services, I noticed the family in front of me at worship. A mother and father were seated with their young daughter who must have been about eight years old. She snuggled up with her parents. Her dad had his arm around her. She was making little doodles on the bulletin. From time to time, she asked them a quiet question. When the time came to sing, I watched her mom line out the words of the hymn for her. From her own lips came the words of the Apostles Creed and the Lord's Prayer. When the offering was received, she placed her own gift in the plate. The practice of worshipping with her family has taught her how to worship. I suspect that she will always have a deep appreciation for the ways in which God comes to us in the ordinary moments of worship. For her, worship will always be a little bit of heaven on Earth.

Worship has a rhythm and flow. Worship takes its cue from the movement of God's story in the Bible. In the Temple, Isaiah finds himself in the presence of God. In the presence of the holiness of God, Isaiah recognizes his own sinfulness. A seraph touches Isaiah's lips with a burning coal taken from the altar. Isaiah experiences the cleansing grace of God. Then he hears the word of God spoken as a call to prophesy. Called by God, he responds in faith, "Here, I am, send me." The pattern we see in the life of Isaiah is true of Israel's history and the story of the church. Israel and the first disciples gathered as communities called by God; they experienced God's pardon and God's grace; they heard God's word and command; they responded in faith and service. Worship is like a dance in four parts: we gather as God's people; we hear the word; we give thanks; we go forth to serve.

At the heart of Christian worship is this movement between hearing the word and giving thanks—between God's gift and our response. In fact, the word *eucharist*, which is another word for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, comes from the Greek work which means *to give thanks*. The sacrament is not only God's offering of salvation to us, but our offering of praise and thanksgiving to God. The order of our service today reflects this four-fold movement and balance in worship. We hear the word in scripture, stories, music, hymns and praise. We give thanks as we celebrate the sacraments, profess our faith, pray for one another and for our world, offer our resources to God and dedicate our lives to Christ. Then we are ready to throw open the doors so that we may, in the power of God's Spirit, serve God in the world. We are women and men, children and youth, who are called by God, forgiven by God, instructed by God, sent out to serve God. The changes we have made in our order of worship in the last month have been made to help us better reflect the rhythm of worship.

Dr. Tom Long compares the experience of worship to the time he and his brother prepared a Mother's Day breakfast for his parents. While his parents remained in bed, he and his brother created a huge mess and nearly destroyed the kitchen as they prepared burned bacon, overcooked eggs and rock hard biscuits. When they delivered the breakfast to their parents, they ate everything and said it was the best breakfast they had ever eaten.

Long notes, “Love, evidently is a wonderful spice...We need to remind ourselves that even when Christian worship is at its best, it is much like that Mother’s Day breakfast. It is always the work of amateurs, people who do this for love, kids in the kitchen overcooking the prayers, half-baking the sermons, and crashing and stumbling through the responses on the way to an act of adoration.” (p. vii., *Beyond the Worship Wars*)

What we do on Earth is to be a foretaste of that heavenly worship in the very presence of God. Each one of us could tell of a time in worship, when the thin membrane that separates heaven and Earth melted away and we experienced what it is to live in the presence of the holy. It may have been at summer camp around the lake or on youth retreat, or a candlelight service on Saturday night when you are surrounded by the presence of love, or Christmas Eve when you come forward to receive Christ who is cradled in bread and wine as he was once cradled in a manger, or in a moment a winter day when the choir sounds like the host of heaven singing, or a quiet moment in the service of communion and wholeness when you discern God’s forgiving grace.

It happens many times in our lives, but I remember the last Ash Wednesday service in my former congregation. The members came forward for the imposition of ashes. With the ashes, I made the sign of the cross on their foreheads and said the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” I looked into the eyes of youth I had known since I had baptized them as babies, elderly friends with whom I had shared joys and sorrows, young adults I had counseled and married, and folks who had known my family for generations. I realized how fragile and how precious life is; I felt how important love and community are. I saw how Christ was present in each one. I knew that I would not see many of these friends again until we meet in heaven and cast our crowns before the heavenly throne. It was a holy moment, a little bit of heaven on Earth, to know that each one of us is called by God, forgiven by God’s grace, commanded by God’s word and sent forth to serve in God’s world.