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“What Will You Bring to the Manger?: Worship” GPPC 12-11-16
Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

This is the third and final sermon in our Advent sermon series entitled, “What Will You Bring to the Manger?” Two weeks ago, we brought hope. Last week, repentance. And this week we bring worship.

We’re going to use the two scripture readings suggested by the lectionary for this Sunday as a backdrop and support to think about worship. How do we understand worship and why do we continue to worship?

Imagine a typical Sunday here at Guilford Park, if there is such a thing. Between the two services probably about 200 people come through the doors and find their way into the sanctuary. And after that everything proceeds like clockwork, doesn’t it? Absolute military precision, right?

Certainly not. We do our best. But pastors will flub some words, and maybe the liturgist will too. We’ll make an announcement, and somebody will correct it. Our musicians will play and sing well, but sometimes they’ll miss a note, or a section, or add a section, or they’ll

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start too soon. Some Sundays we'll have communion and somebody will spill some juice or drop some bread on the floor or into the cup where it floats around in a really unattractive way. Babies will laugh and talk and cry and kids will fidget. The children's sermon may be semi-orderly or it may be chaos with kids wandering around and talking about any subject while the desperate preacher is trying to impart gospel truth. "Did you know I got a new puppy? His name is Alex. He's really nice, but he keeps going potty on the floor." The candles go out or they never got lighted in the first place. Somebody's name got left out of the bulletin, or their name was misspelled or mispronounced. You get the idea.

And these are on the good Sundays.

Compare our worship to carefully scripted and edited TV shows, expert speeches delivered with Teleprompters, and actors who've rehearsed and prepared their lines to perfection. We do our best, but beside such near perfection our worship seems second-rate, positively amateurish, doesn't it? Why bother? Why worship?

Well, God told us to worship. There's one reason. Again and again God commands, "You shall worship no other god." (Exodus 34:14)

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“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8) And the people of God have answered, “O Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!” (Psalm 95:6) “Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing.” (Psalm 100:2)

So we worship God because we’re supposed to. It’s a commandment. It’s the right thing to do. Parse it any way you like, worshiping God is a Christian responsibility.

But “should,” “ought,” “must,” and “responsibility” are not the main reasons we worship God. There’s a deeper reason.

Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner tells about a time in his life many years ago. He was in the U.S. Army and his unit was on bivouac in winter, near Anniston, Alabama. It was after sunset, cold, drizzling, and mud everywhere. And Buechner sat in his army fatigues eating dinner from a mess kit. When he’d finished his dinner, he was still hungry and he saw a soldier with a leftover turnip. Buechner asked him if he could have it. And the man tossed it to him, but Buechner missed the catch and the turnip fell on the ground. Buechner says, “I wanted it so badly that I picked it up and started eating it anyway, mud and all.

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And then, as I ate it, time deepened and slowed down...With a lurch of the heart that is real to me still, I saw suddenly, almost as if from beyond time altogether, that not only was the turnip good, but the mud was good too, even the drizzle and the cold were good, even the Army that I had dreaded for months. Sitting there in the Alabama winter with my mouth full of cold turnip and mud, I could see at least for a moment how if you ever took truly to heart the ultimate goodness and joy of things, even at their bleakest, the need to praise someone or something for it would be so great that you might even have to go out and speak of it to the birds of the air.” (Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey*, 85.)

We do not worship God primarily because it is a commandment and a responsibility. We worship God, because the need to worship wells up within us like a gurgling spring of water in the desert. We worship God, because, when we pay attention, we realize we've received such a bounty of life from God that every week we feel the need to gather in community with other Christians to thank God and to praise God and to listen to God.

Nobody has to guilt us into worship. We come together because we want to and we need to. Like Christians in other countries where people risk their lives to gather for worship, we join our voices with theirs and indeed with all creation to praise God who alone is worthy of all praise.

But what happens in worship anyway?

To begin we are *called* to worship. The leader does not stand up and say, “Please raise your hand if you’re feeling in the mood for worshiping God. When we have enough ‘yes’ votes, I suppose we’ll proceed.” Of course not. We are *called* to worship as a community.

And we usually begin with praise. Why? Because that’s how we approach God as a *community* that’s been blessed. Certainly some of us may be having a difficult day or week or year or decade. But worship is larger than my individual feelings. Worship is what the community of faith, what the church does. And there will always be someone in the community who is hurting or angry or distracted. So, for a time, the community carries the faith for that person until he or she can pick it up again.

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Maybe you've known that yourself. You went through a time when God seemed distant because of something happening in your life. Or maybe you were in too much pain to feel joyful. Have you ever felt yourself carried in faith by the church for a while?

I recall going to my father's funeral several years ago. I had not lost my faith, but in my grief I discovered I could not sing the hymns that day without choking up. And there's no way I was going to be able to stand up and speak. But that was okay. The church sang the hymns and another pastor preached the sermon on my behalf and on behalf of our family. We are not Christian by ourselves; we are Christian in community.

And as we said, when we come into worship, we begin with praise. But then immediately, as we recall who we are (a bunch of sinners) and who God is (holy), we turn to confess our sins. We confess not only individual sins, but corporate sins committed by us as a church, as country, and as a world. We know that evil and sinfulness leaches like acid into our structures and institutions.

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Now occasionally people will say, “Wait a minute. This seems awfully negative. And I didn’t commit the sin that was mentioned in the confessional prayer this morning.” And we say, “That’s okay, you may get around to committing it some time. But for now we confess sin not just as individuals but as a community.”

And then after confessing our sins, we also hear the word of pardon. Again, notice how this pardon is delivered. The leader does not say, “Now, if you’re really *feeling* forgiven, then you *are* forgiven.” And the leader doesn’t say, “If you’ll really be good, *then* you’re forgiven.” No. The leader says, “In the name of Jesus Christ, we *are* forgiven.” In other words, by the power of God’s love in Christ we are forgiven. Now show that forgiveness by living gratefully and by forgiving people who have hurt you.

After we’ve praised God, confessed our sin to God, and heard God’s forgiveness, then we’re ready to hear God’s word to us. And as Presbyterians we believe God’s word comes to us in three ways. The first and by far the most important way is the Word made flesh, Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. The second most important way is through

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Holy Scripture. And then the third most important way is through preaching.

When we listen to the Bible read on Sunday, we remember that the words of Scripture are human words and divine words at the same time. We know the Bible did not just drop down out of heaven one day. And God did not grab the biblical writers' hands and move them over the parchment. Instead, God inspired people to write Holy Scripture so that the words written down by human beings become holy words for us as they are read and listened to in faith and as the Holy Spirit grants us the ability to interpret and understand these words rightly for a new time and situation.

Likewise, we don't imagine that a frail and sinful preacher on Sunday morning is suddenly vested with superhuman holiness and wisdom. Instead, we believe that when the preachers do their best (and sometimes even when they don't) and when the congregation listens in faithful anticipation (and sometimes even when it doesn't) God's word is heard.

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And as the old saying goes, faithful preaching will “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Yeah, we know God loves everybody. But there is a special place in God’s heart for the underdog and for people who are in trouble. For example, as we read in Isaiah and Matthew—the blind, the deaf, the lame, the voiceless, people who are excluded, the poor, and the fearful. Over and over, scripture says God takes a very special interest in caring for hurting folks and people who are being excluded and whose human rights are being violated. And faithful preaching will always call the church to take a special interest in those kind of folks too.

So faithful preaching also “afflicts the comfortable” in that it convicts us of our sin and calls us to be more than we might wish to be. In a supposedly “post-factual world,” preaching must tell the truth even if it is difficult. Talking about the preacher, John the Baptist, Jesus said to the crowds, “So what did you expect? A reed shaken by the wind? A wimp? A scaredy-cat who would never hurt anybody’s feelings? Somebody who conducts an opinion poll before deciding what to preach?” Certainly not. Faithful preaching looks at present

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circumstances with clear eyes, but also looks to the unstoppable reign of God with hope and challenge. It says, “We are not on the earth merely to wait until we are rescued with heaven. We are called to live into hope now, live towards God’s coming shalom.”

So in worship after we hear the scripture reading and sermon, we respond with the offering of lives. We’re given the precious chance to be generous and for our lives to sound notes in the great symphony of God’s kingdom that even now is starting to be heard. And worship itself is a part of it all.

One last thing to say about worship. The 19th century Danish philosopher and Christian, Søren Kierkegaard said we sometimes misunderstand the nature of worship. Worshipers imagine that they gather in the sanctuary to evaluate worship based on the performance of the preacher and musicians. “Well, the choir was especially moving to me today—A+. But the sermon wasn’t very exciting—C-.”

Instead, Kierkegaard argued that there is a “theater of worship.” And in worship there is indeed a performance that takes place and an

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evaluation of that performance. But the worshipers *themselves* are the ones performing while the audience and evaluator is *God*. The preacher and the musicians are not off the hook. They still must do their best to worship and lead worship, but they serve as coaches for the worship that the congregation gives to God.

With that understanding in mind, as we worship each Sunday, we might ask ourselves questions. Did I truly pray or was I distracted? Did I really listen with an open mind and heart to the scripture, sermon, and music? What grade would God give me for worship today?

By the way, consider using the colored bulletin insert of worship questions as you and I worship each Sunday.

Worship is not about our perfection, is it? It's about a direction of the heart. It's about being humble enough to come into the sanctuary, to focus on God, and to hear words that comfort us and challenge us.

In a world of relentless narcissism, strutting and preening like a peacock, we desperately need authentic worship of the God who created heaven and earth. Only such worship can demolish the demonic

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pretensions and pride of our leaders and of ourselves. And only such worship can give us the courage and hope to stand up for truth and mercy and justice. Only worship.

Professor Tom Long tells about the great Rabbi Hugo Gryn. Long writes, “When he was a boy, [Hugo] and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz. They were Orthodox, and even though it meant even greater danger to them, Hugo’s father insisted they observe the Sabbath and the festivals. Hugo remembered until the day he died a time when, to observe the Sabbath, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a *shabat* candle. Hugo was furious... ‘Father, that is all the butter we have!’ His father said, ‘Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope.’” (Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 132.)

All praise and glory be to the One who gives us hope, who alone deserves our worship—our God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal