

“It’s About Worship”

Scripture: Psalm 100

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This morning we will begin a series of sermons that will begin “It’s about...” The “It” for the following Sundays will be about what drives us to be faithful following Jesus. The “It” will be our response to God. The “It” will be refresher to some of you: you will know what I am saying already but it is good to be reminded! And you might even think: “Well, it is about time you got it, William.” For others, the “It” will be a new way to see and experience for some, even transforming. And transformation is what we are about—there may be one rebirth or one time that you acknowledge that you are a follower of Jesus Christ but there are multiple conversions, ahas, and fine-tuning. So the “It’s about” will be helpful. For some, I imagine that I am not going to make much sense at all. You have been in worship and left with that feeling: “I didn’t understand a single thing.” I want to tell you I have some real understanding of attending worship and coming out saying, “I didn’t understand a single word.”

This summer I worshipped in the Bethel Iglesia, una iglesia presbiteriana—a Presbyterian church in Mexico; and I can tell you that you that I came out of worship saying, “I did not understand a single word.” Yet, let me tell you about what happened one Sunday: a woman playing “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” It was her gift to God. She had clearly just begun take piano lessons—her playing was pretty rough...she even stopped a couple of times to repeat a line or notes that she had missed.

On the one hand, there was nothing particular excellent about her playing (far from it!), but it was clear to me that she offered the playing as her gift. I couldn’t understand the words of the service but I understood what the woman was doing; and that was worshipful for me. She was making a joyful noise to the Lord.

A joyful noise, which brings us to our Scripture for the morning: Psalm 100:

¹ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the lands! ² Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing! ³ Know that the LORD is God!

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!

Give thanks to him, bless his name!

⁵ For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

-Psalm 100 (RSV)

Biblically speaking, worship is central to what we are about. It is not so much because we want to worship or even that we ought to worship: we need to worship. We were made for worship. We need to worship...we are made for worship. Even though we were made for worship, worship is not about you and me. It is not about whether I like the music, understand the words, want to get dressed up or want to wear a polo shirt. Worship comes from the root word: worth. We experience worth in God.

We feel value in God. It is not about me...it is about God. This Scripture reading today gives a “theology of worship,” which is just a grand way to say, it gives a reason for worship. But more than a reason; this Scripture reading gives a basic method for worship.

Now, if I were writing this psalm, I would give you the “theology” first. My first inclination is to give the reason, the motivation, and the why. Then once I have explained “why,” I would move to the method. Isn’t that how we usually do things: set out the reason and then implement?

This psalm is the reverse: implement first and then we will talk about “why.” Listen to the verbs: **Make** a joyful noise...**serve** the Lord. **Come.** **Do** it. These are demand words, imperatives, commands.

But we live in a demand world that distracts us. Clearly there is the media that demands our attention—that’s what commercial are about. But there are so many more demands or distractions to just doing worship, counting God as great. First, we have to deal with the fact that our culture no longer supports Sunday as a day of worship. Recently my Dad was telling me that when he was a child, the stores in Charlotte were not just closed on Sunday but they pulled curtains down in the front of their window, so you couldn’t window shop. We are not going back to those days; and even if we did, who is going close down the Internet, the cable offerings, or the sports offerings, or the soccer leagues? We are not going back to a time of reduced distractions.

Just to get to worship you have to bypass distractions; and not just the cultural ones. Oh, I remembered all too well how getting ready to come to church was as stressful as anything in our family. The power struggles of what time to get up and what to wear; and then to walk in the church door and smile as if you had not just wanted to strangle each other.

Then you get close to worship and the conversation is about all the things that are vying for your attention: schools, aches and pains, football, and so on. There is nothing bad about these conversations...the social network of being the church is certainly wonderful. But they are really not leading us into worship. And then there is worship itself. You are finally ready for worship just to overtake you. You want to be swept off your feet. You want to be filled with something larger than you. You want something to get through all those demands and distractions. From that old television show Star Trek, we want to flip open our communicator and say, “Beam me up, Scotty.” Transport me. Then worship does not take you anywhere.

Why not? Try this comparison. Let’s say you make all the plans and arrangements to get to Paris to visit that great art museum, the Louvre, in order to see the Mona Lisa. There is the flying time, transportation, loss of sleep, and you finally get there, working your way through the crowd only to find that the Mona Lisa is not available for viewing. All that cost...all that energy...all that effort; but they say: “We have another piece of art to share with you.”

[Hold up hanging] Well, *I* would pay to see this hanging! I have here my object lesson for today (and I will try to have an object with me for the next several weeks). This is a rather primitive hanging; nothing great on the artistic side. To anyone else, it may seem trivial but it is precious to me. For almost 15 years, it has been hanging in my office. One of my children gave it me saying, “Dad, I want you have a little sunshine in your life and flowers.”

It will continue to hang in my office. It is not on loan to Louvre. It is precious because of the spirit in which it was given, not because of the excellence of the artistry. If this were an art museum, you would say, "That's not what I came for!" Yet I see something that is priceless.

Here is the final distraction or demand that gets in the way of worship: worship is not about you. You and I are the final distraction. We come ready to be swept up, to be transported, to be taken care of. We get in the way of worship so easily because we begin ask the question: "What's in it for me?" Worship is not about you and me. This ancient Scripture reading, tested and tried for nearly three thousand years comes back to us. It is about God. He has made us and we are his. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Although it is textually suspect (a long scholarly debate), some of you remember how the King James Version rendered this text:

He has made us and not we ourselves.

Worship is not made for you and me...we were made for worship.

The method, the tactic, and the strategy is to make noise to God...to serve the Lord...to come into his presence. Doing worship, looking not with the eyes that look for what's in for me but rather for what God is doing. What is God doing in that rough playing of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness?" How can that hanging be so precious? We put ourselves in the worship actions, coaching ourselves that it is about God.

Now as many of you know, I am trying to learn how to dance. The emphasis is on trying. I can describe for you the steps, the moves, the timing, and the direction of the cha-cha-cha and the Viennese waltz and yes, the Carolina shag. I know the theory...but that's not dancing. Dancing is when you embody and implement what you know. Worship is not the same: it is action.

Now I will readily confess that when it comes to dancing, there are many times I get downright frustrated when I don't get it. The easiest thing to do would be to give up. I am frustrated by both my own lack of abilities to dance and my envy of those who do "get it." To top it off, there is often music playing that I don't particularly like.

Now let me admit a bias here, I have hard time with rap music. I am old fogey. I will admit to it. I exercise that parental veto in the car saying, "I will listen to rock and roll but not rap!" This summer, I learned a very basic cha-cha-cha routine. Guess what the music was? Rap! I had to dance to rap music! You know, as I started to move from just learning to dancing, I started to like that song that we were dancing to!

Worship is frustrating at times. We get through all the distractions to get here and then we face the final distraction: ourselves. We have to get past ourselves to move in a way that does not always feel natural, move to music we do not like, to an order we may not like, to say words we are not sure we understand, much less believe. But here is strategy of worship: make...serve...come...enter...give.

Here is what will happen: We will find those moments when we know that the Lord is God, that we are his, that God is good, that year after year, generation after generation, God is dependable, reliable,

faithful. No preacher, no church, no music, no video clip can contain and control worship. So you didn't see the Mona Lisa in worship today...you only saw this primitive hanging. But I can testify that if you see it through my eyes, you will see something precious. I know from my own experience and from so many others that as we keep doing it – making that noise, giving those thanks, entering those gates, laying ourselves out and getting out of the way by not asking “Am I going to get anything out of it?” – we will know God. We will know we are his. We will know God is good and faithful. When we look and keep looking, God meets us here.

Now the talk is over...and what else can we do but throw ourselves into an expression of worship. Turn with me to hymn number 455 in the Hymnal. “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Psalm 100 has only been around for about 3000 years inviting us worship God and working its way in us. Gosh, this song only goes back to 1225, to Francis of Assisi (a great story for another day!). It finally settled on a tune in 1623, translated into English in 1906, and harmonized by Ralph Vaughn Williams about 100 years ago. Here are words that for almost 800 years people have found enlivening to their faith. It has been tweaked and adapted and modified along the way (and I guarantee that there were folks who were disappointed it was not sung the old way).

The poetry here says we are throwing ourselves in this; that all the world gives praise to God:

- the wind (verse 2): Have you ever stood in awe before the majesty of great storm—the awe at the power.
- the water (verse 3: Have you ever stood at the ocean and been swallowed up the immensity of the water or in the mountains to hear the babble of stream making noise to God.
- the earth (verse 4): the grandness of a sunflower, a forest, a field of corn.

However, here is where my worship bones just shiver (verse 5)

And everyone of tender heart
Forgiving others, take your part.
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear
Praise God and cast your care.

Let's make a joyful noise. As we do so, I will give you three cautions. First, some of you will sing and be right in line with the melody; that is tuneful. Some of you will sing along and it will not be the melody, but it will sound good with the tune; that is harmony. Some of you will make that joyful noise that is neither tuneful or harmony and that is okay too; that is jazz!

Let all creatures of our God and King make a joyful noise:

1. All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

2. Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
Ye clouds that sail in heaven along,
O sing ye! Alleluia!
Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice,
Ye lights of evening, find a voice!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

3. Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
Make music for they Lord to hear,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou fire so masterful and bright,
That givest us both warmth and light,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

4. Thou fertile earth, that day by day
Unfoldest blessings on your way,
O sing ye! Alleluia!
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,
Let them God's glory also show!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

5. And everyone of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take your part.
O sing ye! Alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and cast on God your care!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

6. All creatures, your Creator bless,
And worship God in humbleness.
O sing ye! Alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
And praise the Spirit, Three in One!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!