

Worship is Our First Calling
Don Lincoln
Psalm 95; Isaiah 6: 1-8

Long ago, and far away on vacation, I wanted to just go to worship – not be in charge. I picked a church from the guide in the hotel, which listed a service at 10:30 AM. My children and I arrived at the door of the church at 10:31 so we could sneak in like “regular” church members!

A hymn of praise was being sung; the usher was exiting with the candle lighter. We headed for a pew; the hymn concluded, the minister came forward, gave the benediction and headed for the door. Obviously, the time from the hotel was wrong. But my young daughter turned to me – her pastor father – thrilled that worship had been so short, and said: "Hey Dad, beat that!"

We’ve all heard jokes about long sermons, sleeping in church, and fidgety kids in the pews. We laugh, because in reality, they touch us each – after all, worship is fine, but we have our limits.

To which I say: **Worship is our first calling.**

Twelve years ago I was in this building for the first time, meeting with the Pastor Nominating Committee, I heard someone say: “Why can’t we get these new people to do more than just worship?” Teach Sunday school, work in the nursery, come to a church dinner, serve on a committee, and all those other things.....?

I understand the concern; the desire and hope for fuller discipleship in all. But I said it then, and I say it again: I don’t want anyone in this congregation to be heard saying, “They JUST worship.”

Worship is our first calling.

The Westminster Catechism that guided Presbyterians for four centuries begins with the following question and answer, (forgive the language; it is dated):

The first question of the Catechism:

What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.¹

The chief end of man and woman is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Our reason for being, chiefly – to give glory to God; to enjoy God’s presence in our lives and in the world. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Nothing –

no one, NO thing, no other gods – before the One in whose image we are made. How different the world would be if the whole world obeyed the first commandment – if we replaced all the other things we worship – power, place, prestige, good looks, money – replaced them with the living God. How DIFFERENT this world would be.

Worship is our first calling. It is the first calling of all of God's creation. Worship is what makes **THIS** different; makes US different. It's not all the other programs we do, or plans we make. You can go to preschool elsewhere. You can gather in your neighborhood for a covered-dish supper. You can sing old songs with family around the campfire; you can even collect clothes or pound nails with colleagues from work, or form a book club with the soccer parents.

Those may be nice things to do with other Christians, but they aren't what make us church – it is worship of the living God that gives us our identity. Without worship, we would strike the world as nothing more than a sanctified form of rotary.²

Worship is our first calling!!!!

Eleven years ago, Westminster worshipped in two traditional services – 8:30 and 11:00. The choir sang at 11:00. In the summer we had one service.

Eleven years ago we also developed a vision statement, and that first component – **Worship is our first Calling** – was fleshed out with the following words:

“Our worship will be relevant, inspiring, diverse and varied.” My guess is some of you might argue whether **EVERY** worship has been relevant or inspiring!! But there's no question our worship is diverse and varied.

We've changed worship schedule 9 times in 11 years; the most recent being the addition of the Wednesday prayer and communion service. (I never miss it if I am in town. It is a holy time.) Our worship styles are now described as traditional, contemporary, Taizé, contemplative, alternative – we worship in multiple spaces, at various hours, and even on different days, morning and night. Variety in art, music and visuals – like you see today – we put up a banner and set the communion table a little differently because we believe we will continue to be inspired as we engage with God with all our senses!

What is worship? This past week I was talking with someone, and said: “You know, when I see the majesty and beauty of creation, a gorgeous sunset, the vast sea, snowcapped mountains; or – I ponder the mystery of the human body, how a combination of carbon, hydrogen, and a few other elements in this body can feel love, hope, despair, passion and joy – I am in awe.” It is amazing! That kind of wonder, thanksgiving, amazement at who we are and what happens in our lives is the very beginning of the heart of worship.

Worship is where you and I realize, remember and celebrate. It is where we say we love God for making us and making this crazy amazing world.

“This shall be for you a day of remembrance (Exodus 12:14);” the words of ancient Israel at the first Passover and every Passover since. They remembered God's saving acts through the waters and at the Exodus. They remember and give thanks for God's mighty acts. “Do this, in remembrance of me,” Jesus said. So we do. We gather at His table, and remember. “Sing songs, hymns and spiritual songs,” the apostle writes. So we sing! (At least most of us do!).

These words remind us over and over what it means first and foremost to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength. And it is first and foremost in worship where you and I recall, rehearse and celebrate in thanksgiving **WHO** we are and **WHOSE** we are.

This past Monday, deacons and elders gathered to listen to the statements of faith of new officers. Colleagues gave testimony to their journey; how they had been nurtured in the ways of Christ. And we heard stories of how – in the midst of a crisis in marriage, or a terrifying diagnosis – how God had been real and present; how God had used other faith communities or even members of this congregation to bring comfort and hope.

The evening was filled with a good bit of laughter as folks recalled those funny moments in their journey, but it had a far healthier dose of tears. And I kept nodding in both amazement and understanding; muttering “AMEN” under my breath; feeling over and over again the lump in my throat at such sacred stories. I wanted to shout, “Thanks be to God!” Thanks be to God for the way God continues to work in our lives and in our world. Thanks be to God for the stories in Scripture that, like our stories, remind us we belong to an amazing God.

It was a holy and inspiring evening. An evening that even though it had no formal liturgy – felt like worship – telling the story of God's amazing acts of grace and kindness in human history.

Worship is not primarily about us, or what we are supposed to do. It is primarily about what God has already done. When baptismal waters trickle down the face of an infant and we declare that little boy or girl is bound to this holy God, who loves them even before they can speak, we know who the primary actor is -- it's God and that's what we're here for.³

One of my favorite stories: Will Willimon before he became a bishop, pastored the Duke Chapel and other congregations. He recalls the time after worship, he was at the back door greeting folks and one lady said, "Good morning, Pastor Willimon, you know I did not like that last hymn." Will Willimon said, Well, I'm sorry to hear that, but you know what -- we weren't singing to you."

Worship is first and foremost about this God who breaks into our lives.

Around 742 BC, during a religious festival, Isaiah was standing with the priests near the altar in the temple. He watches the movement of the ancient ceremony, rich in symbolism, color, and music. The grandfather of Presbyterianism, John Calvin often used this text to speak about the proper form of worship. For here we find songs of praise and adoration, prayers of confession, assurance of forgiveness, and a word spoken to the human heart.

Calvin said, "That's the design of worship, right there in Isaiah."

It is clear in that text that Isaiah finds himself growing increasingly sensitive to spiritual things, becoming more and more aware of the divine reality in and through the symbols, the music, the smells, the ritual. In that moment Isaiah experienced the Holy One anew.

Friends, the world is hungry for the holy -- hungry to connect with that which brings deeper meaning. Why do you think the world worships so many things? It's casting about for some reason, some purpose. One of the things I love about being here in worship is that it is some of our best evangelism. Let folks who are seeking that something, come in and watch, see and hear and our remembering, our rehearsing, our recalling the joy of knowing God and telling the powerful stories of God's presence. Let them see by the power of worship that God is real; it's contagious; God is here.

BUT – one other thing we learn from Isaiah is that such an encounter rarely leaves us unchanged.

Here I am, Lord.

That's the scary part. Because this is the context in which God not only comforts us but where God confronts us, challenges us, speaks to us and beckons us. So if you don't want that, don't come back next Sunday. If you don't want to be stirred, pushed and pressed, don't show up in this space anymore, because every experience with the Holy gives us something to say and something to do and sometimes even the strength to say and do it.

That is why a number of years ago we added to our vision statements the new statement about worship:

We commit to worship that glorifies God, and transforms us.

It is here that our lives are reframed and rearranged, and renewed for service in the world.

The rest of this six-week sermon series will be about what our worship does to us and with us and through us.

May it be so for all of us everyday.

Amen.

1. The Westminster Shorter Catechism
2. C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream.
3. Martin B. Copenhaver; "*Stillspeaking*" online devotional.