

2-28-2021 THE WALK: Worship and Prayer
Psalm 95:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Matthew 7:36-50
First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana
February 28, 2021 Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

LOST IN WONDER, LOVE AND PRAISE?

How often do you stop and think about the moments in life that take your breath away? How often do you stop and think about the places, experiences and moments that have made you feel more alive than you ever thought you could be?

I'd like you to think about those right now as we begin this conversation about the life-renewing power of worship and prayer.

You may have, in those experiences, suddenly felt so connected to God that words failed to capture it. You may have, in those circumstances, suddenly felt so connected to the people around you that it took your breath away. You may have, in those times, felt so connected to the very universe, to the cosmos, that you found yourself laughing or crying.

What beach were you walking, what trail were you hiking, what sky were you watching, what poem or text were you reading, what was it about the way the sunlight caught the fields of wheat along side that county road in Kansas, what was said or done as you and the others worked to prepare meals to give away in the church kitchen- that turned wherever you were standing into holy ground?

How is it that you came to be -using the words of Charles Wesley - "lost in wonder, love, and praise?"

BEYOND THE WALLS

I could be wrong but I think many of these moments didn't take place in any kind of a formal worship service. I suspect that many of these holy moments, these "lost in wonder, love, and praise" experiences happened not inside a sanctuary made of wood, brick and stone but somewhere else.

You will have your own list but my list would include sitting on a picnic table late at night, outside Estes Park, Colorado, with a full moon above my head. A small river was whispering about twenty-five yards away in the dark to my left. I was facing a great open meadow that led all the way to the great mountains to the west. The breeze was slight but chilly so I zipped up my coat. The moonlight was so bright that it was lighting up the snow fields high up in the mountains, and the snow reflected the light back down into the valley...across the great flatland...and to the picnic table where I was sitting. There was a kind of glory that entered my trembling heart as I tried to take it all in...but there was too much glory, mystery and beauty for me to handle.

You will have your own list, but I remember standing in the delivery room as each of our three sons were born. I remember joy lit me up from the inside out. If Moses came down the mountain, after having been with God, with a face that was shining so brightly he had to cover it so he wouldn't blind those around him, I'm sure my face was equally as bright as I stood in those delivery rooms. Then, I walked in a daze back down the hallway to deliver the news.

You will have your own list but I remember coming into the Morris Civic Auditorium in South Bend one evening, absolutely spent in all sorts of ways, and then the orchestra began to play Aaron Coplan's "Fanfare for the Common Man" and something happened in me...to me.

You will have your own list but I remember reading the first page of Norman Maclean's great novel about fly fishing, faith, family and grace, *A River Runs Through It*, and stopping. I re-read the first page or two with a holy reverence, marveling at his ability to put words together. It seemed to me that a great gift had come to me...a great gift had found me.

INSIDE THE WALLS

You might expect a preacher type to say that worship moments and prayer moments happen solely within the framework of formal worship in sanctuaries built of lumber, brick, stone and glass but this preacher won't say that. Holy moments, encounters with the divine, that cause us to be "lost in wonder, love, and praise" often take place in sanctuaries that take the form of mountains, rivers, hospital rooms, campfires, conversations over coffee, working shoulder to shoulder with others in a kitchen that is preparing meals to be given away, and novels and pieces of music created by those with a genius for that sort of thing. This preacher recognizes that there are other kinds of sanctuaries than the ones built out of lumber, brick, stone and glass.

You can find examples of bad, lifeless, passion-less worship. I'll grant you that. There are worship services that were no more inspiring or beautiful than watching someone half asleep read through an Apple service contract. Just like you can find examples of stores that sell bad bananas. But here is the thing: there are actually moments in worship and prayer that are life-changing. There are actually moments in worship when the glory of God enters the room.

It may happen during the baptism of a child who grabs the preacher's ear and won't let go...the way a little boy grabbed my ear and my nose a couple years ago in Bloomington. We laughed and we were reminded how God's grace grabs us and won't let go of us.

The moment in worship that may have changed everything for us may have had something to do with a phrase spoken by a preacher, or the way the light through a window caught the communion cup we were holding, or the way the older couple standing just ahead of us reached for one another's hands as a soloist began to sing *The Gift of Love*. They found one another's hands without even looking down, and they didn't let go of one another...even when the last note of the song was sung.

You will have your own list, but I remember a dark December night in a dark corner of the world when I, as a teenager, felt God connect with me in a life-changing through a simple nativity tableau and a Canadian soprano singing a carol I have never forgotten.

You will have your own list, but I remember gathering with hundreds at Annual Conference a lifetime ago for worship, and hearing a preacher named Walt Mayer preach a message that lifted me up and carried so many of us into the presence of God. I can't remember a word he said. (*Most sermons are quickly forgotten but what we remember is the moment...the God encounter...the wonder.*) I remember that God

was at work in his words, and in the way he delivered them to us, and even now the memory of that moment lifts my heart.

You will have your own list, but I remember standing with over twenty other clergy and bishops in a church building in Kenya. The service would end up lasting five hours. The service, which was to dedicate a new building, went through one piece of liturgy after another. One prayer was followed by another reading, and it all seemed very Western. Very restrained. Very Anglican.

Then, multiple sets of doors on the right side of the sanctuary opened at the same time, and women began to dance into the sanctuary. It was, they said, time for the report of the United Methodist Women. (*I'd never seen a UMW report like this before!*) I looked over at the Bishop of Kenya and he was smiling from ear to ear. "Now," he said quietly with delight, "it begins!" The music, the joy, the clapping, and glory of God, filled that room until the walls seemed to hum and vibrate with the joy of it. We have become more restrained and dignified in the North American church but our African brothers and sisters still know how to make a joyful noise to the Lord!

Now and then, believe it or not, the glory of God and the love of God and two-edged sword truth of God shows up in worship...in sanctuaries just like this one. And people are changed forever. Heaven and earth connect in a way that makes the powers of darkness shudder.

WORSHIP

We know, as we said last week, that some things work and some things don't work when it comes to walking with Christ...connecting with God...living an abundant life. Some things work and some things don't work in helping us walk with Jesus... accompany Jesus.

And two of the ways that works to keep us connected with Christ and growing in Christ is the experience of corporate worship and private prayer. The psalmist, in the opening verses of Psalm 95, reminds the people of God of the power, the beauty and the importance of worship:

*O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*

*O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking*, says this about worship: *To worship God means to serve (God). Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for (God) that (God) needs to have done—run errands for (God), carry messages for (God), fight on (God's) side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is*

to do things for (God) that you need to do—sing songs for (God), create beautiful things for (God), give things up for (God), tell (God) what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for (God) the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.

A Quaker Meeting, a Pontifical High Mass, the Family Service at First Presbyterian, a Holy Roller Happening—unless there is an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful.

As we end today, I want to say a couple of things about the experience of Christian worship.

First, the experience of worship is a corporate thing. There is nothing else that can replace the experience of coming together with other human beings to say “Thank you” and “I love you” to God. Some people insist they can worship just fine on their own, but that is like trying to make play tennis by yourself. Worship is something the people of God do **together**.

Second, being even more specific, worship is something we all do together. Too many people make worship a spectator sport. The people in the pew or the auditorium may see themselves as the audience and the audience watches and listens as the preachers and pastors and musicians worship. Worship is something we all **do** together...the people in the pews or standing in the auditorium and the people standing on the worship platform.

If you are sitting at home, or if you are sitting in a pew, or if you are standing in an auditorium for worship, you need to be in the game...not just watching. Your willingness to prepare your heart for worship matters. Your willingness to come with open heart and mind matters. Your prayers for the musicians and worship leaders and preachers matter. And your passion for saying “Thank you” and “I love you” to God matters. Worship is something we do together.

Third, God is the focus of our worship. One of great lies of contemporary Christianity is the belief that worship is performance. We rate worship in churches the way the Michelin travel guide people rates restaurants. Was the sermon too short or too long or just right? Was the music too traditional or too contemporary, too soft or too loud? What has too often happened is we think worship is designed to impress and wow the crowd. But worship isn't that at all!

The **focus** of our worship is to be God. Our worship is what we bring to God. Our worship is about our coming to say “Thank you” and “I love you” to God. It's not about the preacher or the musicians wowing us...entertaining us...inspiring us...or pleasing us.

I need to say more about that and this is very important: sometimes we measure the quality of preaching by whether we like what we are hearing. We tend to measure the message by whether it is what we wanted to hear. But that is backwards: we should be measuring the message not by whether it pleases us but whether or not it pleases God.

When we demand that the sermon please us, that it affirm what we already believe and how we already see things, then we have turned God into a Barney Fife-

like deity. Remember Deputy Fife on the old *Andy Griffith Show*? He was timid and always eager to please. Insisting the sermon should please us is demanding that God be timid, like a divine waiter asking us what he or she can do to please us, rather than allowing God to be the Holy One, the mysterious and holy Lover who often speaks a word that sets us free but only after first cutting like a two-edged sword.

Fourth, worship needs to be a regular thing. It used to be that someone worshipping regularly would be in worship three or four times a month. That has decreased rather significantly over the last decade so now people think they are worshipping regularly when they engage in that activity once or twice a month. Pastor Adam Hamilton says that at Church of the Resurrection they encourage their members to be in worship at 90% of the time. Or, at least, 80% of the time.

Worshipping only occasionally weakens our connection with God and others who are trying to walk with Jesus. A church made up of those who walk with Jesus only now and then is a church that is unlikely to change the world let alone making a difference in its own neighborhood.

I look back to that night sitting on the picnic bench below the Rockies, and I'm glad I didn't miss that experience. I look back at the moment I opened up Maclean's novel *A River Runs Through It*, and I am glad I didn't miss that experience. I look back at the Kenyan church where the joy nearly shook the building off its foundations and sent it skipping across the mountain tops in praise of God, and I am glad I didn't miss that experience.

Worship changes us...when it is something that matters to us and something we make a priority in our lives.

Fifth, worship is always best if it is a response to the love and grace God has already given us rather than a desperate attempt to earn God's favor. Worship is a **joyful response** to the decision of God to love us, to claim us and to make us God's own beloved people.

I love the story in Luke 7 about Jesus attending the dinner in the home of Simon the Pharisee. In the middle of the meal a woman of the city slips into the room and stands behind Jesus. Luke doesn't tell us her name, but he says that she is a sinner. The woman, without a word, stands at the feet of Jesus weeping. Her tears are so many that they wet the feet of the Galilean Teacher, and then -in an act that is very personal and very physical- she dries the feet of Jesus with her hair. Then, the woman kisses the feet of Jesus and she anoints the feet of the Teacher with a very expensive ointment.

The reason we have read this passage today is because it shows us what gratitude looks like. The woman comes to Jesus, Luke explains, to say "Thank you" for the grace and love the Teacher has offered her. Jesus offered love and grace to a woman others simply wrote off as a sinner...a loser.

She comes to say "Thank you." She comes to say "I love you." And she comes offering an extravagant, expensive gift of ointment as a sign of her gladness and her devotion.

What we see here is a pattern for worship!

Worship is best when it is a response to a gift already given by God, and not some religious ritual performance designed to earn God's favor and goodwill.

“Thank you.”
“I love you.”
That is why we come to prayer.
That is why we come to worship.

How often do you stop and think about the moments in life that take your breath away?

I wonder if we might look back on this moment, someday, and say, “Then...there on that day...in that worship experience...I came alive in a new way. God and I connected in that moment and my walk with Jesus has been different ever since.”

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(This section on prayer was not preached but will be shared with the congregation at a later time.)

PRAYER

Before we are done today, let me say several things about prayer, first, and then about worship. The truth is that whole libraries have been written about the mystery that prayer is, and we may have a sermon series in the future devoted to prayer.

Here are several things I know about prayer.

First, prayer is a conversation with God that is lifelong and on-going. Prayer is all about a relationship and isn't just some kind of spiritual transaction where we “place an order” with God. The point of our praying is being with God and it isn't delivering an order slip to the divine.

Second, prayer is best when kept simple. Jesus became very frustrated with the complex words and fancy phrases the priests and preachers used when they would pray. Keep your prayers simple and real.

Pastor Adam Hamilton reminds us that at the heart of our prayer life is simply saying “Thank you” and “I love you” to God.

Third, prayer is best when done each day.

Pastor Adam Hamilton asks us to look at our hand, and let our five fingers remind us to pray five times each day: begin the day with a prayer. That is hard for me to do because I tend to be a doer. When my alarm goes off, I tend to get going and jump into the day. But I have finally learned to pray before I get around and go. I try to begin the day with a word of thanks for the night, a word of praise, and ask God for his presence through the day that God might help me remain true to God and grounded in grace. Begin the day with a prayer, and then pray at each meal. Finally, at the end of the day, thank God for the good, ask for forgiveness for the moments when you got it wrong, tell God you love God, and then turn the world over to God as you close your eyes to go to sleep.

Here is a fourth thing I have learned: prayer never disappoints. That doesn't mean I always get the loaf of bread I am asking for, but it does mean that prayer -being with God- always blesses me. I am more at peace. I am more real. I am more present. I am less anxious. I've never been to South Haven, Michigan for a visit to the lake I love and come back disappointed. It may be warm or cool, the wind may be up or very still, the water of the lake may be bitterly cold or just right for swimming, but I always come back more alive...more me...more God's. Prayer changes us...and

makes a difference in who we are and how we live. Prayer never disappoints. It is never wasted effort or wasted time.