

“O Come, Let us Worship”

Psalm 95 is an exquisite psalm, calling us to worship Jehovah, or Yahweh, the Hebrew/Christian God. This psalm begins: “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! For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods” (Psalm 95:1-3). Sing to the Lord...make noise, joyful noise...come before the Lord with thanksgiving! Verses 6 and 7 continue: “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 sheep of his hand.” Let us worship and bow down before the Lord our Maker!

Worship! Worship means “to ascribe worth” to something or someone. “Reverence or adoration for a deity”. It seems to be in our blood to worship something. All through history, in every civilization, we humans have created some sort of *gods*. In Biblical faith, we are commanded to worship the true and living God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.

Why is worship so important? Certainly, because God is worthy of adoration and praise! We are to give to Him the glory due His name! But I believe when we fail to worship the true and living God, life has a way of eroding, going sour, getting off track. Behind this is the conviction that when we humans are confronted with the Living God in genuine worship, certain things happen!

William Temple, one of the noted men who served as Archbishop of Canterbury, once made a classical statement about worship:

“To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God,
to worship is to free the mind with the truth of God,
to worship is to purge the imagination by the beauty of God,
to worship is to open the heart to the love of God,
to worship is to open the will to the purpose of God.”

Let’s look at these statements more closely. ***To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God.*** We all have, to some degree, the voice of a conscience within us. That sense of right and wrong. Christians also have the Holy Spirit – who convicts us when we sin, and prompts us to do what God wants. Left to ourselves, however, our conscience can become dulled, and the voice of the Holy Spirit can be muffled. But when we come face to face with God in worship, our conscience can be pricked and reawakened, and made sensitive to God’s call to holy living.

That happened to the prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah goes into the temple to worship, and he has an encounter with God. He writes, “I saw the Lord...high and lifted up...holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:1,3). Isaiah’s response? “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5).

It’s very easy, when we leave private and public worship out of our lives, to lose that sensitivity to what is evil – to get off beam in our living. But aren’t there times in worship – *I hope so* – that

as we get a glimpse of the holiness of God, that we get a better sense of our sinfulness, and our need to change? When I was 30 years old, I left pastoral ministry. Nancy and I were married a few years and had a young child. We moved to Lancaster. I got a job in a bank. I kind of got away from the Lord. There was one area of my life that I made a little moral compromise. No big thing, but I knew it just wasn't right for a follower of Jesus. We had joined a church, worshiped there regularly. One Sunday the pastor talked about integrity. And there, in worship, in the house of God, I knew what I was doing was wrong. First chance I got, I changed it, and did what was right. *To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God.*

Archbishop Temple also said: ***To worship is to free the mind with the truth of God.*** It is no accident that in Communist countries, or in dictatorships or totalitarian states, that those in control often forbid *worship services*, or in some ways seek to monitor or control them. Because when we truly worship the God of the Bible, it has a way of liberating us with truth – the Truth of God.

For Hebrews, God and truth were inseparable. Christians worship the living Christ who said, “I am the truth” (John 14:6), and who also promised that if we are His disciples, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). It's easy for us to get stuck in the narrow hallways of our own opinions, biases, and selfish perspectives. The French critic, Venet, once wrote: “Most friends of truth love it as Frederick the Great loved music. It used to be said of him that, strictly speaking, he was not fond of music but of the flute, and not indeed fond of the flute, but of *his* flute.” In other words, we often prefer *our own version* of the truth to the *real* truth.

Back in 1940, when the world situation was deteriorating, and the chaotic events were frightening even the most courageous people, the editors of *Fortune* magazine (no less) wrote these words in an editorial: “In order for humanity to progress, it...must have faith...that absolute spiritual values exist. The Church, as teacher and interpreter of those values, is the guardian of our faith in them...without spiritual leadership the maladjustments of our political-economic system must inevitably increase.” That was 1940. Unfortunately, many more people today live like there are no absolute spiritual values. But there are! And worship is a way of getting in touch with those absolute values that are God given, and freeing us from getting stuck in the quicksand of our own limited views and perspectives. *To worship is to free the mind with the truth of God.*

Then, too, Archbishop Temple said, ***To worship is to purge the imagination by the beauty of God.*** The writer of Psalm 96 said, “Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” (Psalm 96:6). Because human nature is infected with sin, it's easy to become captive to that which is vulgar, cheap, tasteless. I believe we Americans are losing some of the sense of beauty and dignity and wholesomeness of life. Compare the films and TV shows of today to those of previous generations. The trash on the internet. The way people dress, even for school, weddings and funerals. Nancy and I have been on a few cruises. Most of them have a comedian who will do a late night performance “for adults” – translated, it means profanity and dirty jokes. (Thankfully, there was none of that on the Gaither Homecoming Cruise).

One day (in another church) I received an email from a young lady in the congregation. She sent it out to a group. It was kind of vulgar and raunchy. She discovered, to her embarrassment, that somehow I was one of the people who got it! She apologized, but the deed was done! Maybe some of us have had that misfortune. Mike Slaughter, pastor of Ginghamburg Church, a remarkable, large, teaching church in our denomination. I once heard him say how he meets regularly with an accountability group in his church, and that if he didn't have those few people to hold him morally accountable, his morals could be like the morals of his dog!

Most of us can be vulnerable to all kinds of unworthy thoughts and desires! And one way to get rid of the garbage that sometimes clutters our imagination and behavior is to *regularly worship in the house of the Lord!* “Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.” I hope that this place of worship brings to us a yearning for what is beautiful and wholesome and lovely!

When George Matheson was a well-known pastor in Scotland, there was an elderly woman from the slums who worshiped in his congregation. She lived in a cellar that was dark and damp and airless, but she didn't think anything of it for years. Then one day she moved. She didn't move far, but she found a place where there was light, and air. Friends asked her why, after all these years, she had decided to move. Her answer was brief: “Because you can't hear George Matheson preach and live in a cellar.” *To worship is to purge the imagination by the beauty of God.*

To worship is to open the heart to the love of God. The author of Psalm 5 wrote this: “Because of your unfailing love, I can enter your house; I will worship at your Temple with deepest awe” (Psalm 5:7 NLT). The words “unfailing love” is a translation of the Hebrew word that describes God's *covenant love* for His people. If we're followers of Jesus, we're bound to God through the *new covenant* God has established through Christ. God loves us, forgives us, accepts in Christ. We come here in worship to celebrate all God has done for us in Christ, because the amazing, abiding love He's poured out on us.

When we really experience God's love in a personal way it changes us! How many times in worship have people come guilty, and found forgiveness; grieving, and found comfort; confused, and found direction; broken, and found healing; feeling worthless, and found a new self-worth! All because of the love God has for us! *To worship is to open our hearts to the love of God!*

There was an architect who got the brilliant idea that all public rooms ought to be no higher than 12 feet! He said that high-vaulted ceilings tended to make people feel inferior. One well-known Christian read that, and thought about all the people she had seen worship in some of the great cathedrals of the world. She asked, were they feeling insignificant? No. “They were realizing that life has a grandeur and a beauty and a significance above and beyond themselves that awakened in them high aspirations.” It's not low ceilings that will give us a deep sense of belonging and self-worth, but a glimpse of the high and holy God who loves us, and longs to help us reach our full potential as His daughters and sons in Christ. A young man, going into a church building, said to the pastor, “I love to come in here. It makes me feel bigger than I am.”

Finally, Archbishop Temple said, *to worship is to open the will to the purpose of God.* Psalm 73 is a wonderful psalm. The writer had gotten to the place where he looked at life cynically: Life isn't fair. I've tried to live a good life, all for nothing. Bad people make out so much better! Then this great word in Psalm 73: he says, "When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply *till I entered the sanctuary of God*" (Psalm 73:16-17). In worship, things began to look differently. The psalm ends with these words: "But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge" (Psalm 73:28).

Now, no matter how faithful or serious we are in worshiping God, we will never understand all of the mysteries of life, nor all the ways of God. But praising and glorifying God, reverencing God in worship, can give us a different and better perspective on life.

Another Scripture that shows us what can happen as a result of worship is Isaiah, chapter 6 – the passage we looked at earlier in this message. Isaiah goes into the temple to worship, and experiences the presence of God. Isaiah confesses his sins, and God forgives him. Then God speaks to Isaiah: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord say, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8). Genuine worship has a way of lifting us out of ourselves, and out of our self-centered desires and plans, and moving us to say to God, "Here I am, use me, send me, make me a blessing to others. Help me to fulfill Your purpose for my life by serving in Your name."

Martin Luther King once told a story of a wise old preacher who went to a college to preach at a baccalaureate service. After finishing his message he lingered on campus to talk with members of the graduating class. He spoke with a brilliant young graduate named Robert. His first question to Robert was, "What are your plans for the future?" "I plan to go immediately to law school", Robert replied. "What then, Robert?" "Well, I plan to get married and start a family, and then get myself securely established in my law practice." "What then, Robert?" the preacher continued. "I must frankly say that I plan to make lots of money from my law practice and hope to retire early and spend a great deal of time traveling to different parts of the world – something I've always wanted to do." "What then, Robert?" "Well, these are all of my plans." Looking at Robert with a gentle and patient concern the pastor said, "Young man, your plans are far too small. They can extend only 75 or 100 years at the most. you have to make your plans big enough to include God and large enough to include eternity." See, to worship is to open our will to the purpose of God.

"O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker" (Psalm 95:6).

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