

A Life of Praise

I Samuel 1: 4-20; Hebrews 10: 11-14, 19-25

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I. Introduction

In 1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson was invited to preach to the senior class at the Cambridge Divinity School, and he told them, "What greater calamity can fall upon a nation than the loss of vital worship? Then all things go to decay. Genius leaves the temple to haunt the senate or the market. Literature becomes frivolous. Science is cold. The eye of youth is not lighted by the hope of other worlds, and age is without honor. Society lives for trifles."

I was struck by that line, "The eye of youth is not lighted by the hope of other worlds and society lives for trifles." This is a world in Emerson's opinion devoid of vital worship. Worship is, of course, why we come here this morning and come here every Sunday. And I want to spend some time today reflecting on what vital worship looks like and why it's important.

We are nearing the end of our stewardship campaign, which is focused on time. Stewardship is often used to talk about money, but is really a broader issue about how we use all of the resources that God has given us. Our basic theme has been that as we learn to use our time with God's work at the center we find ourselves less fractured, spread less thin, and instead of hurrying and scurrying from one thing to the next, we find our time grounded in the different kind of way that gives life and purpose to all the things that we do, and then everything else falls into place.

And learning to use our time well is a similar lesson to learning how we use our money well, so I will be making some of those connections later on. Each of the last several weeks we have focused on one of the major work areas of the life of our church which we call the pillars. The five pillars of our life here together are praising, learning, caring, sharing, and serving, and the last of these this week is looking at praising.

My hope as I have mentioned throughout this series is that as you listened to the sermons and look at the brochures in your bulletins, that you will hear God's voice inviting you to engage in one of the areas of the work of our church and that answering that call then becomes a place where you start to ground and center the other pieces of your life with God. When we talk about praising, obviously we talk about Metro Players and we talk about the wonderful choirs and music ministry, we talk about liturgists and greeters and all of the folks, the flower guild and all of the people that make worship here as rich as it is. And some of you may feel a call to engage in one of those ministries. Maybe you'll hear a wonderful piece by the choir and you say, "You know what, I want to be part of that group," or you take a look at the beautiful altar decorations and say, "I want to be part of making that happen." But I also want to suggest that how we engage worship is something that we all do together. When we

talk about worship in a church context, we use the word "liturgy" which is a Greek word that means "the work of the people," because worship is something that all of us engage in together to make happen.

II. The Heart's Home

Let me start by saying that I believe worship is at the heart of who we are as people of God. Worship is our natural response to the grace and love that God offers us so that whenever we encounter the divine, our natural inclination is a response of awe and gratitude, and that is what is at the heart of worship every single week. Over and over again, as we hear the stories of scripture, we hear the great mothers and fathers of our faith who encounter the reality of the divine and their immediate response is to move into praise and worship. Over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures, as the patriarchs and matriarchs travel to the Holy Land and create a new community there, they have an encounter with God and immediately they set up a pillar, a place of worship where they praise God for what God has done for them. When the disciples encounter the Risen Christ after the resurrection, their immediate response is to fall on their knees and worship. And when the scripture writers are trying to capture what eternal life looks like, the picture they paint is a picture of the community gathered praising God forever, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts," sang all of the gathered saints in the Book of Revelation.

Of course, all of the work of our church is important and we have so many rich places to plug in in a community like Metropolitan. All the opportunities for learning, all the opportunities for sharing, all the opportunities for caring, but all of those happen in other places as well. So, if you're interested in learning, there are all kinds of venues, schools and lectures, where you can go and get new information, you can learn new things. There are all kinds of places to engage in our city and vital service, in nonprofits all over the area. There are all kinds of places where we engage in caring for one another, whether it's in support groups or therapy sessions or 12-step communities, where people nurture and support one another in their journeys. But worship only happens in the community of faith. That is what is at our core as children of God. And we all have a role in that worship.

For people in my role, pastor and author Eugene Peterson writes, "The most important thing a pastor does is to stand in a pulpit every Sunday and say, 'Let us worship God.' If that ceases to be the primary thing I do in terms of my energy, my imagination, and the way I structure my life, then I no longer function as a pastor," which is to say that all of the things that a pastor does in life with the church are important -- the meetings and the teaching and the pastoral counseling, but here is where it all comes together.

III. Authenticity

So, if worship is our natural response to our experience of the holy and if it is the place where we are most who we are meant to be, then it must be the place where we bring

all of our selves. And that's not always as easy as it sounds. As Janet noted in her children's time and as Steve describe so beautifully in that passage from *Doubt*, all of us bring our own baggage to the experience of worship. All of us bring places of brokenness and places of hurt and places of deep sorrow as well as places of great joy, places where we're seeking a discerning word to see how we can follow God more faithfully. We bring all of that to our worship, but our struggle, of course, is it's not obvious that all of us are doing that, right? I love that image that Steve just gave us of looking through a window where everybody on the other side of the window looks happy and contented and together, and I feel isolated in my own place of brokenness or pain. But again, if worship is who we are called to be, then we need to bring all of that stuff into our experience of worship. And we see this so beautifully modeled for us in this story from I Samuel that we heard this morning.

In the story, Hannah is grieving deeply that she has no child. Her husband, Elkanah, has two wives and his other wife has children and mocks Hannah for her barrenness. And Elkanah, while he is a lovely man, clearly, is a little bit clueless. Did you hear that? Because Hannah's grieving not having children and Elkanah's response is, "But aren't I enough for you? Isn't my love enough?" He sort of missed the point. So, Hannah brings this great weight and this sorrow into her experience of worship in the temple and she's crying and she's praying to God in a way that is a very powerful model for what worship should be about, bringing all of what is on our hearts and minds to lay before God and to experience God's resurrection power. But even in this story, the priest, Eli, sees Hannah crying and praying and assumes because he's not used to this kind of authenticity in worship he assumes that she is drunk and says, "You can't do that here. We have certain expectations for decorum in our church," amen? And Hannah says, "But here is what I'm wrestling with." And Eli, to his credit, immediately turns around and says, "Daughter, the Lord will hear your prayers." He affirms the sanctity of sharing all of who we are before God.

So, I think the first thing that our lectionary text invites us to do is look at how we bring our most authentic selves to worship, how can we come into this place and be vulnerable enough to share our pain and our uncertainty, our doubts, our hopes, our dreams, our joys, because that's what being in worship together is about. And the message I think that is implicit in this passage from Samuel is that it's only when we can do that that we allow the spirit of God to move in those situations and start to bring about healing. We see this sometimes in worship.

Last Sunday as we celebrated All Saints' Day and people came to celebrate and honor those who had died in the last year. As we serve communion I often see people come through with tears in their eyes as they remember and grieve their loved ones. That's what holy worship should look like.

So, here is my invitation to you: How do you bring some of your more authentic selves into this experience? And here is my promise: That if you can work on being more authentic, I will not assume that you're drunk. How is that? Fair? Amen.

IV. Preparation

So, part of what our passage from Hebrew invites us to do is to look at the preparation that we bring to our experience of worship. Paul in this letter talks at some length about the fact that before Christ, we had a certain model of worship where the priest would offer sacrifices on a regular basis, but he says, but Christ has taken care of all of that for us, all of the things that separate us from the love of God have now been removed through the power of the cross and we have the right and the gift and the opportunity to enter into the presence of God renewed and forgiven. And so, what Paul tells us is knowing that now we have the opportunity to prepare ourselves to experience God in new and powerful ways.

So, what does it look like to prepare ourselves for worship? Not just the leaders preparing ourselves for worship but what does it look like for everybody to prepare themselves to experience the presence of God in worship. Because part of the struggle with the way that we're set up is I'm up here on what appears to be a stage and you are out there in what appears to be the audience, and we hear that language, don't we, when people talk about church we say, "Well, the audience wasn't responding." Well, here's the secret -- you're not an audience. The liturgy is the work of the people. It's the work of all of the people and we all bring ourselves, all of ourselves, to this experience if we want to be open to how the spirit is moving.

There's a stewardship story where a family has just been to church and they're driving home and the father is complaining about the quality of the sermon and the mother is complaining about the quality of the music, and the little boy in the back says, "Well, that all may be true but how much entertainment do you expect for \$1?" We're going to get to the dollar later on. But what I want to suggest is this is not an entertainment experience. This is not a place that you come and simply receive what I am putting out, what the choir is putting out, what the other worship leaders are putting out. You come here to be participants in this experience of worship. And if you don't, then you're probably not going to get that much from it. You're only going to get what I bring in, what the choir brings in and the other worship leaders bring. Your invitation is to bring all of who you are to this experience also. So, how do you prepare yourself to engage worship in a way that is going to be life-giving for you?

One, I want to suggest you start off with some good prayer. You've got to make sure that you are inviting God to speak to you in this place. There are churches where they have teams of people who come into the sanctuary and bathe the sanctuary in prayer before the service starts. I love that image. But even if we don't have that group in place, how do you pray for me, for the other leaders, for yourselves, for the other participants to invite God's presence into this place? One of my suggestions is that you look at the scriptures before you come to hear the sermon even if you're not the liturgist, because as you look at those scriptures and read them and maybe even study them, you bring a whole new set of eyes to whatever the sermon is going to be about. And if we're serious about our belief that the Holy Spirit seeks to speak to us every time we engage scripture, then reading the scriptures ahead of time is a powerful way to prepare

for the experience for worship. Because all of the pieces, the sermon, the music, everything is going to be tied to those passages. That's a powerful way to prepare.

Being like Hannah is a powerful way to prepare. To be self-aware enough to know where the places are in your life that you are hurting, to know where the places are in your life that you need guidance and insight, to know about the places in your life where you are celebrating and rejoicing and bring all of those into this experience. Because as you come with the commitment to be active participants in what happens here, your whole experience of worship and frankly everybody's experience of worship is going to change.

God is at work in these moments seeking to engage every single one of us to offer us a word of hope, a word of life, a word of wisdom, and we infinitely increase our chances of hearing that word if we come prepared and expectant as participants in the work of the people.

V. Conclusion

On that July day in 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson raised the warning of a time when the eye of youth is not lighted with the hope of other worlds and a society that lives for trifles. That's a picture of a world without vital worship, a world that doesn't cast a vision of where God is calling us and who God is calling us to be. That's work that we are all called to participate in as we seek to be the community through which the power of the Holy Spirit moves to transform our neighborhoods and our nation and our world. All of the work that we do as a church is important but what happens here is that we open a gateway for the power of the Spirit to move through us and into the world that is in so much need of healing and so in desperate need of vision and hope. We can be that as we engage in the process of welcoming the presence of God into our lives and into the world.

Amen.