

WORSHIP IS WEIRD!

Psalm 96

Mark Toone...July 13-14, 2019...Chapel Hill Church

(Isaiah 6 reading-then Toccata in D Minor duel between organ and guitar)

It is so cool to have musicians who can take an idea and turn it into reality. I have always loved that piece by Bach. But one day I had a crazy idea: what if a pipe organ and an electric guitar performed it together? I wanted to do it because I could hear it in my head and thought it would be spectacular! And I think it was.

BUT...I ALSO wanted to do it because...I thought I'd stir things up a little bit. You see, for many people, Sunday worship is **all** about the music; it is how we **define** worship. For some, a service without pipe organ is not real worship. For others, the organ is passé; only modern music is authentic.

What you just saw could be a parable of the feud going on around the world: worship wars that rip churches apart. Traditionalists versus modernists, organ versus guitar. **OR** ...what you saw could be a glimpse of God's **creativity**; a fusion of diverse musical expressions of praise. **OR, what you saw could be a complete distraction.** We get so consumed deciding whether we liked it, or what part we liked, or whether it was too loud, (and what's with the smoke!)... that we miss the point entirely: **What IS worship?**

Frankly, "worship" is weird. Even the word is weird. The phrase "Worship **service**" is weirder still. To the outsider peering in, what we do here every Saturday/ Sunday ...all this singing and praying and preaching and hand-raising and plate-passing and eye-closing and swaying and cross-making... seems incomprehensible...and weird.

So...what is it? What is worship? Well, the lyrics of an ancient hymn called Psalm 96 give clues as to how we ought to understand this weird thing we call "worship."

Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!"

So...like I said...worship is weird. And confusing. If you grew up with it...if this is what you did as a kid...you may not think twice about it. But imagine the person who has

never darkened the doors of a church...who wanders in on a Sunday morning and sees this. What is going through their heads?

There's a stage up front with theater lighting and microphones. People seated in front of the stage. At the appointed hour, musicians appear and play. Then the speakers...who read from a book of poetry and recite their lines. These are apparently the warm-up act. Then comes the headliner in the spotlight who makes HIS presentation. At some point money is collected; presumably it's the cover charge. Sometimes the crowd applauds. Then they vacate the premises to allow the next group to enter...and it starts all over.

Now...if you are a newcomer...what is the closest thing you can compare that to? A performance. A play. A musical act. You've got the musicians and actors up front. SO what does that make all of you? The audience. And what is the object of it all? To make you happy. To delight you. To inspire you. If we succeed, you return and bring other seat-fillers; we extend our run. If not, you go elsewhere next week and find better actors, better musicians, better special effects, better coffee. Or maybe, you go nowhere at all.

Is THAT what THIS is all about? A performance? This might seem crass but it isn't my idea. A theologian named Kierkegaard posed this thought. He said that people think of worship as theater. The preacher is the actor, God is the prompter...whispering the lines to the preacher...and the congregation is the audience waiting to be entertained. **But we have this backwards**, says Kierkegaard. In Christian worship, the preacher and musicians are the prompters. We are whispering the lines to you, the congregation, which makes you what? **The actors**. And who is the audience? **GOD is our audience!**

Our psalm captures these ideas: God is the receiver of worship, we are the bringers of worship and, one more thing, outsiders are the onlookers of worship. Let's start with the most important...and most counter-cultural idea of all: God is the receiver of worship. Put a different way, what we are doing here right now is **primarily** about God. Do you know where we get the word "Worship"? It is a contraction of the old English "worth-ship." Worship is the act of ascribing worth or value to something. We "worship" what we value or admire or adore.

When I hold Cyndi in my arms and whisper that I adore her and think she is a spectacular wife...which I do daily...in a sense, **that** is an act of worship. Last Wednesday, New York City threw a ticker tape parade to celebrate the US women's soccer team's World Cup victory. (PIC) In a sense, **that** was an act of worship.

The primary purpose for this gathering is **to declare God's worth**. To acknowledge his greatness. The psalm orders us to **"sing to the Lord...to tell of his salvation...to declare his glory...to describe his marvelous works."** It reminds us that God is the creator of all and deserving of glory and praise for who he is and what he has done. We are even told to be a little afraid. We are, after all, in the presence of greatness. The whole earth ought to "tremble" a bit.

Some Washingtonians experienced a trembling earth this week. Imagine the whole earth shaking with delight or fear or both because the Lord has come near. Our God is the awesome creator and redeemer and sustainer of all things. We sometimes forget that...but when we gather for worship...it reminds us that God is the **worthy one** who deserves to be acknowledged, loved, thanked, praised...and even feared.

So if God is the receiver of worship, then we are the bringers of worship. And by “we” I mean believers. We who know and love God; we who have received his grace; who realize that all we have comes from his hand. Believers are the ones to whom this psalm is addressed. It prescribes how we ought to worship our God and does so with a whole list of action words: **“Sing, bless, tell, declare, ascribe, bring, come, tremble, say.”** We are the performers, **we** are the actors, **we** are the bringers of worship.

This explains another weird thing: why we call it a “worship **service**.” Have you ever pondered that? We don’t call it a “performance.” We don’t call it an “act” or a “show.” We call it a “worship service” because that’s what **WE** are doing. **WE** are serving God with worship. When we gather, sing, pray, listen, allow the Spirit to change our hearts and minds...these are ways we **serve** God as we declare his worth-ship. **Worship is not PRIMARILY about what I receive...it is PRIMARILY about what I bring to God.**

Now, I’m not saying we believe this. I doubt that we do! Frankly, we are a product of our entertainment culture. We **TEND** to assume that everything is about us, including worship. That’s why we criticize worship by saying things like, “I didn’t like the music” or “The sermon didn’t feed me” or “The people weren’t friendly” or “I couldn’t find a good place to sit.” **Now, none of those issues are irrelevant. Music style** is language; it is how the Spirit speaks to us. **Sermons that actually ARE** helpful and engaging are better than those that are not. **Friendly co-worshippers** make the experience more pleasant. And a **comfortable seat** with a view is always a plus. But here’s the question: **If the music sucks, if the sermon sucks, if the people suck, and if you end up sitting behind a pillar... can you still worship God? Or not?**

My wife Cyndi reminded me of a trip to England during which we attended a **VERY** traditional cathedral service. She was bored. Then, she told me, she realized that this was about **HER** heart, **HER** attitude, **HER** effort in focusing on God. She realized that **ANY** style of worship that is Spirit-led and Christ-centered is pleasing to the God. She **DECIDED** to change her mind, her attitude...and pour herself into worshipping God in an unfamiliar way. It was one of the most profound worship experiences in her life.

“Worship” is a verb. It is **OUR** action... something **WE** do...not something being done to us or for us. And **IF** we take the psalmist seriously, it might change the way we prepare for or behave in worship. For instance, if we made God the priority of worship instead of ourselves, would it impact our **punctuality**? Our boss would never excuse repeated tardiness because we “had trouble getting going this morning.” If we knew the Queen of England was waiting for an audience with us would we stumble in 25 minutes late? Does God deserve less? We have a weekly appointment with the Almighty God of the

Universe! He is here, on time, waiting for us. If we REALLY understood ourselves to be meeting with God, maybe we ought to show up...brace yourself... early! Sit down. Pray a prayer. Read the text for the morning. Quiet your heart before the Lord so that **you** can bring **him** your very best. Coming early? I know, mind-blowing, right?

Or maybe our fresh perspective on worship would affect our **frequency**. God's rhythm for corporate worship is weekly. It's built into the Sabbath. We are designed...created...to thrive when we pause every seven days and enter God's presence in community. If every weekend you find yourself asking the question, "**Should we go to church this week?**"....what is that saying about your view of worship? "**Well...who's preaching? Is the choir singing? What time is the game?**" Those are statements of the consumer, not the worshipper. "**If nothing else better comes along, I guess we can go to church.**" I'm sure God is enthused by your enthusiasm.

The psalmist also talks about bringing an **offering** as worship. **What does your giving say about your devotion toward God?** Heck, we give 15% to a good waiter and yet begrudge the ten percent tithe to God, often hiding behind the excuse that "all the church every does is ask for money" --even though that's a crock. Our giving is worship.

Or maybe a renewed sense of worship would change the way you **sing**. One of the best things about attending our denomination's national gathering is the worship. There are few things more exhilarating than listening to 700 pastors sing their hearts out to God. The psalmist urges us to sing, sing, sing! **If we focus** on the quality of the musicians instead of our own exuberant participation---we focus on the wrong thing. **And by the way, you'll note that the psalmist invites us to sing a "new" song.** Perhaps he meant something modern. Perhaps he meant singing an old song in a new way. But it is clear he DIDN'T mean, "There is one and only one type of music that pleases God." **Hear me on this, all of you traditionalists AND modernists: when your musical preference becomes your highest value in a worship service, that is idolatry.**

So...if you really understood all this...really believed that what we are doing here is PRIMARILY about God and not about us...would it change **any** of your behaviors?

Now here's where I differ with Kierkegaard. Worship is not ONLY about God. In fact, worship IS God's invitation to us to **experience** him in community; to be **assured** of our forgiveness and reminded of our salvation; to share in a transcendent experience that lifts us, even for a moment, into the heavenlies. **A chance to listen to God's word proclaimed, to have our spirits lifted, to have our tears dried, to have our loneliness assuaged. A genuine worship encounter with God WILL impact us.** Just as Moses' face shone brightly after he met God on Mt. Sinai; we cannot help but be transfigured by worship. **But that transformation is the byproduct of genuine worship. Not the purpose of it.** Our question going out of worship should not be, "Did it **please** me or did it **speak** to me or did it **feed** me or did it **move** me or did it **meet my needs?**" The question should be, "God, were YOU pleased by what I offered you today?"

God is the receiver of worship, we are the bringers of worship...but the psalm mentions a third party. The unbelievers. The not-yet-followers. Every time the psalmist speaks of the “nations” or “the peoples” he is talking about non-Jews; outsiders. But notice, even they are invited to be onlookers of worship. **“Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.”**

One of the ways spiritual outsiders become insiders is for them to observe us as we worship. The sincerity of our worship, the things we say about and sing about and pray about God...are a witness to the unbeliever. As they eavesdrop on us telling of God’s story and praying; as they notice the look on our faces, as they watch us lift hands up or dip them into our wallets or use them to pass communion elements...all this becomes an invitation... to THEM... to meet our God. We hear it in the psalmist’s invitation to the outsiders to join in: **“Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength...come into his courts.”** We welcome you! We invite you to join us in worshipping our great God!

Incredibly, not all Christians welcome outsiders. Some assert that worship is ONLY for believers; that we should make no concession to unbelievers. But if you’ll recall, the largest courtyard in the temple was the Court of the Gentiles so that God’s house could be a house of prayer for ALL nations! God LONGS to draw unbelievers into his worshipping community. Last year we became more careful about insider language, more intentional about welcoming the stranger. We’re not watering down the message in the least. We are simply trying to make it more accessible to those who have not yet discovered that Jesus loves them and died to save them.

Here’s the thing: EVERY human being was created for this. EVERY human being worships something. It’s just that most of the world worships worthless idols: money, fame, power, sex, celebrities, sports. Just look at the Seahawks swag on game day. **Well, for one hour**, every week, we gather in God’s house with God’s people-- along with some interested onlookers-- to worship the only one who is worthy. In that moment, we declare, **“God, this is about you. About loving you and thanking you and ascribing to you the glory you deserve. We aren’t here to be entertained; we are here to perform for you...acts of praise and worship and sacrifice that we hope will delight you. For you are worthy of our worship.”** Great is the Lord...and greatly to be praised!

This sermon has churned in me for a year. In some ways, it might seem wasteful to preach it on a beautiful July weekend; to compete with vacations and other enticing objects of worship. **But you’re here.** You could be elsewhere doing other things...but you chose to be here! To make the worship of God your priority. So let’s start here! If 1000 of us decided to change our hearts and attitudes and practices; if 1000 of us made the counter-cultural decision to make worship about God and how we please him rather than how it pleases us...that could go a long way to changing our whole worship culture.

So...faithful worshippers, I urge you once more: **Sing a NEW song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name...for great is the Lord...and greatly to be praised!**