

January 16, 2011  
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 6:1-8  
Psalm 51:1-12

### Worship: Gathering and Confession

We are taking these next 4 weeks to focus on Worship – What it is and why we do what we do. Last week we talked about what worship is. You all did a beautiful job sharing with me your definition of ‘what worship is’. You said that it is:

Coming together to pray.

Giving thanks and praise to God.

Listening, sharing, and praying.

Serving God – Learning to serve others.

It is singing.

Remembering vividly, the saving act of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What I reminded us about worship last week is that worship is *our response to God's mighty acts*. I reminded us how God initiates worship through the act of creation, the act of providing for us all the things that sustain life, the act of claiming us as his own – giving us the gift of faith – calling us into community as the people of God, and God initiates worship in the act of salvation – through the work of Christ – his life, death and resurrection.

God acts and we respond in an *abundance of ways* – in praise and thanksgiving – in singing and dancing – in shouting out and in sitting in silence – in speaking and in listening – in waiting and in coming forward – in giving – offering – in raising our hands – and bending our knees.

We learned that worship doesn't simply happen in a particular place at a particular time – but it can *happen any place and any time* – it can be individual and it can be corporate. After last Sunday's sermon a man sent me a picture of a communion table set up on the hood of an Army Jeep in the midst of a snowy field. Worship is worship when we respond to what God has done. – Worship is worship when what we do is directed toward God.

We learned that worship is *not about us*. That it is not about us being more centered, or happy, or having a sense of self-fulfillment – or in order that we might be blessed with more stuff – or better health – but worship is about serving God – it is about giving ourselves to God.

Worship we learned is a *verb* that requires us to act. In worship we are not the audience come to watch some great production – but instead we are the actors offering our worship to our God.

There is one last thing we need to carry forward from last week into this week – that is that worship *forms us as disciples* of Jesus Christ. That in our serving our servant Lord we learn more and more how to live as Jesus taught – how to love as Jesus loved.

That was all last week – so how about this week. Well this week we are going to start looking at why we do what we do in worship – and this week we are going to look at the beginning movements of worship. Now remember that I will be speaking about worship in the context of our corporate worship – in the context of worship here at Echo Hill.

As we gather in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening – it can be a noisy place – people are greeting one another – sharing about what has been going on – asking about one another’s week – recruiting help – finalizing sound checks – or rehearsing for the bell choir. Some people find all the noise distracting or even irreverent. For me growing up as a Roman Catholic the sanctuary was a place where you did not talk – and yes I was Shhhhhst more than I care to admit to you.

When people ask me about all the noise – I am always mindful in remembering that we are simply people – coming from the midst of our everyday lives – sharing that life with one another. I am reminded that God – in Jesus Christ meets us where we are.

So it is the work – the job of those first *movements of worship to move us from the midst of where we are – into the awareness of being in the presence of God.* This is not about place – God is there in the midst of all of our lives – this is about a shift in focus. Does that make sense to you?

This movement begins most often with music being played – a soft sound in the midst of the noise – a piece that is beautiful beginning to remind us of the one who creates all that is beautiful – a familiar tune that connects us to worship.

As the music ends – we are welcomed – the worship leader welcomes us and in doing so points to the welcoming presence of God in Jesus Christ.

– ‘Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

- ‘Let the little children come to me,’ Jesus says, ‘do not hinder them – for as such as these is the kingdom of God.’
- ‘Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burden – and I will give you rest...’

This gentle transition continues as we work through the announcements and possibly the prayer requests – it concludes with the invitation – ‘Let us worship God.’

What happens next depends on what service we might be attending but each in their own way are calling our attention – asking us to remember what God has done and what God will do. Each inviting us – coaxing us – to join them in remembering – as we in prayer, in song, in our responsive calls to worship – to remember and to warm up.

Most often these beginning movements of worship call us to practice adoration – or praise. Now adoration is about naming those attributes about another that are admirable. In our reading from the Psalm 51 we see the Psalmist acknowledging God’s attributes of steadfast love – abundant mercy – God’s ability to forgive – to wash clean – to restore.

God acts and we respond. The worship leadership reminding us – the song – the hymn reminding us – what God has done – and us responding – in prayer – in song – in lifting our hands – in bowing our heads – in the serving of God in the offering of our praise and adoration.

The opening movements of our worship are meant to help us focus on the God who is Holy. The God who is not us – who is more than us – more that we could ever be. The opening movements are meant to awaken us to the God who speaks a word and creation comes forth. The one who

commands the winds and the waters. The one who has the power to destroy us but chooses that power to save us – a cross – an empty tomb.

The opening movements of worship are meant to awaken us to this God who is a consuming fire – and – a life giving water? This God in whose presence we see angels – hiding their faces and feet as they call out – *‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of host?’*

In his book, “The Trivialization of God” Donald McCullough uses an illustration from Kenneth Grahme’s fantasy ‘The Wind in the Willows’ (Perhaps you remember the wild adventures of Rat, Mole and Badger.). In it we see the response of Rat and Mole as they come into the presence of God.

“This is the place of my song-dream, the place that the music played to me,” whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. “Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!”

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some August Presence was very, very near....

Perhaps he would never have dared to raise his eyes, but that .... The call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse, were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden. Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humbled head; and then... he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper...

“Rat!” he found the breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. “Afraid! Of Him? O, never, never! And yet – and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid?”

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

*“Trivial gods will never turn muscles to water, bow heads and root feet to the ground,” McCullough says – “But neither will they fill us with the wonder-full awe in the presence of the only Friend and Helper who can save us.”*

Worship begins when we are called out of the ordinary into the holy. Worship is our response to God’s holiness – to that which God is and we are not. It is our response to God’s mighty acts. It is our service of God.

Is there no amazement anymore as we stand before our God? Have we domesticated God to such a degree that we dare offer a bored yawn in our worship – instead of screaming out – ‘*Woe is me for I am a man – I am a woman of unclean lips – who lives among people of unclean lips?*’

Now – awakened to God’s holy presence – we are not only **called to confession** – but we are ready for confession. It is only when we stand in the light of God’s holiness that we can truly see the sinfulness – the brokenness – of our own lives – both as individuals and corporately as members of this community – this nation – this world.

This is what we see in the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm. King David is confronted with the reality of sin in his life by the prophet Nathan (who speaks for God). In the light of God’s holiness – David sees the corruption of his words and deeds. And in this light he is left on his knees seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness. “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*” (51:1)

There are two ways that our call to confession acts in bringing us to confession. The first is by reminding us of God’s love for us – his love that is expressed in mercy, justice and forgiveness – a love that calls us to respond in confession. “*For God so loved the world...*” The second, is by reminding us of a hesitancy to respond to God’s action in our lives and in the world. “*If we say we have no sin we are self deceived and the truth is not in us...*”

Moved to **confess** we do so together and individually. Our prayer of confession is meant to help us respond to God's purity – by expressing humanity's impurity. The common comment about our prayer of confession is, "Well pastor, I'm not saying all those things when I never did them." – Our corporate or unison prayer of confession is more than a personal confession (the silence we offer is more for that). Our confession of sin is made on behalf of ourselves, our community, our nation, and our world. – As God's people we can never separate ourselves from one another for we are bound together – as God's creation – to be with one another – to care for one another.

It is here in this place where God acts in Jesus Christ (Declaration of Forgiveness) – forgiving our sins – cleansing us – renewing us – unburdening us from the past – so that we are free to live less in our sinfulness and more in God's holiness. We respond – in song – in celebration.

My assignment to you this week is for you to make some room to think about, to meditation on, to feel the presence of the God who is Holy. What does it mean to worship a God who turns "*... muscles to water, bows heads and roots feet to the ground,*" The God who also *fills us with the wonder-full awe – the presence of the only Friend and Helper who can save us.*"