

February 6, 2011
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Joshua 24:14-18
Acts 2:37-47

Worship: Our Response to God's Mighty Acts

Scripture

Our first reading today comes from the Book of Joshua. Joshua, the one who took over the leadership of Israel from Moses, has lead Israel into the Promised Land. Joshua, who has lead the conquest of this Promised Land from those who inhabited the land – ‘the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites’. (24:11)

Joshua is about to ‘go the way of all things’, so he gathers Israel to Shechem. The elders come, the heads of the tribes come, the judges and the officers come. They come and present themselves to God at Shechem. Here Joshua reminds them all that God has done for them; rescuing them from bondage in Egypt, providing for them in the wilderness, fighting for them as they took possession of the land that was promised.

Then Joshua calls them to recommit themselves – to choose who they will serve. In doing so Joshua calls us to chose who we will serve.

In our second reading from Acts the day of Pentecost has come – the Holy Spirit has descended on the disciples. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, much like Joshua, speaks to the crowd of those who have gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. He reminds those listening of God's promises to Israel – promises of a Messiah who will free God's people from all that binds them.

He shows how God's promises have been fulfilled in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Then he calls the people to respond in repentance and in baptism.

God acts and we respond. It is at the heart of our worship. Worship is where we learn to respond to God's acting – rescuing – redeeming – calling us out of life that is headed nowhere – calling us to live as God's creation – good and blessed so that we might be a blessings.

We see that the response of those early Christians didn't stop at a call to repent and be baptized but that they commit themselves to serving God in all of their lives. Luke writes, "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*"

This morning I will ask us to recommit ourselves to the service of our God. To recommit ourselves to our worship and to lives that are defined as worship as we serve our God by serving others.

Let us pray.

We have been talking about worship. By now you are, perhaps, weary of my repetitive reminders about worship.

What is worship? Most simply, I have said, it is our response to God's mighty acts. Worship is our service of God. Worship is a verb – it requires us to act. Worship is God focused – not us

focused. Worship is an act of discipleship – it is a place in which we learn how it is we ‘follow Jesus’ and it is a way we learn to ‘follow Jesus’.

Thus far we have talked about why we do what we do in worship. We talked about how those first moments of worship are intended to draw our focus away from ourselves and our lives and redirected toward the God who is holy – the one who turns ‘muscle into water, roots our feet to the ground, and bows our heads’ – the one who fills us with fear and makes us glad.

Open to the holiness of God we are moved to confess our unrighteousness and in doing so find ourselves drawn close to God once again. It is there in that closeness that we can hear God speak to us a Word of Life. We learned that listening requires discipline on our part that we have to be ready and expectant, that we have to be attentive, and that we have to be ready to wrestle with this word.

We were reminded last week of how God speaks to us not only in words read, proclaimed, sung – in the beauty of artful proclamations – but how God speaks to us in the sacraments – allowing us to experience in real – tangible, touchable, feel-able, taste-able, ways the fullness of his love for us.

This morning I still have a bushel basket of things for us to consider in regards to worship. Get your pencils ready and your jogging shoes on and let’s see what we can get covered together.

Let's start with prayer. I would define prayer as simply our conversation – our talking to and with God. Now if I were to ask you if you could pray for 5 minutes – you would probably say yes. And if I asked you if you could pray for 10 minutes – you might say well probably. But if I asked you if you could pray for an hour – well – now your pushing it pastor. Truth of the matter is that's what we do in our worship – we pray for an hour – we take this time to be in conversation with our God.

The Directory of Worship (Book of Order PCUSA) says that “*Prayer is at the heart of worship. In prayer, through the Holy Spirit, people seek after and are found by the one true God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ. They listen and wait upon God, call God by name, remember God's gracious acts, and offer themselves to God. Prayer may be spoken, sung, offered in silence, or enacted (that is by our standing and sitting – the bowing of our heads and folding of our hands, the raising of our hands and our expressions of praise)... Prayer is shaped by the Word of God in Scripture and by the life of the community of faith...*”

Then it goes on to say, “*In prayer we respond to God in many ways. In **adoration** we praise God for who God is. In **thanksgiving** we express gratitude for what God has done. In **confession** we acknowledge repentance for what we as individuals and as a people have done or left undone. In **supplication** (praying humbly for ourselves) we plead for ourselves and the gathered community. In **intercession** (praying boldly for others) we plead for others, on behalf of others and for the whole world. In self-dedication we offer ourselves to the purpose and glory of God.” (W-2.1000)*

In other words – worship from beginning to end – is one big prayer. (See you can pray for a whole hour.) Got it? Great!

So let's talk about music and song for a moment. If we understand our 'order of worship' as mediating the movement between God acting and us responding – if we see the things on the screen or in the bulletin as helping to form our response and shape our service – then we know that the music that is played and hymns or songs that are sung are not used to entertain us.

The music and song that we use in worship should open us (in a very different way than the spoken word can) to the majesty and mystery of God – it should feed our imaginations as it brings us into the beauty and splendor of the God who created and sustains all things – it should move us to respond to the living God who calls and claims us – even as it forms our response.

Sometimes it's just music – as we gather before worship, at the prelude, during the offering. – Sometimes, though, it is music and words - sung by the choir, a trio or soloist as an anthem or offertory – and sometimes it is sung by all of us in a praise song, a hymn of response or a closing hymn. Regardless, the music we use in worship should help us to know the God in whose presence we come and to respond to that God.

Music and song – is also prayer. It helps to form our response of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, or dedication. In it we seek God’s help for ourselves, for Christ’s church, for our nation and for our world. Through it we offer ourselves to God, we dedicate ourselves to God and we commit ourselves to the work of God in our world.

Our order of worship places and uses prayer, music and song so that we might see more clearly God at work in our lives – even as it forms our response and shapes our service – as we worship the living God.

In our scripture readings this morning we see clearly how upon remembering God’s saving and redeeming work we are brought to a point of rededicating – recommitting ourselves to the living God we know most fully in Jesus Christ. We do this recommitting in many ways. Sometimes it is through a hymn that is sung, or a song for meditation, or call to offer oneself. Sometimes the hymn, the song, the call is a response of thanksgiving, sometimes it is prayer of confession, at other times it is song of commitment and at other times it is a plea for help.

A *Profession of Faith* is a response we find in two of our weekly services. What a radical thing we do here ... we proclaim to our God, to one another, to our world the things that we believe about our God. In proclaiming these truths we form ourselves as a people. For example today we begin by claiming that ‘there is no condemnation in Jesus Christ’ and so we become people

who are confident – that in our living and in our dying – “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”.

Almost every Sunday/Wednesday we pray a *pastoral prayer* – when we don’t (when we are celebrating the sacraments) this prayer is found, in part, in our prayer of Great Thanksgiving. The Pastoral Prayer is not the pastor’s prayer but it is a prayer said on behalf of the people. (In fact sometimes it is referred to as the *Prayer of the People*.) When I form this prayer on your behalf – I begin with offering our thanksgiving to God, thanking God for being God, for his creation, his providing, his claiming, his redeeming, and his transforming. Most often I will refer to the Trinity, giving thanks, for Father, Son and Spirit.

From thanksgiving we move to self-offering as we give to God our needs – needs that we have for ourselves and needs that we bring on behalf of others. You will hear me pray on behalf of those we mentioned during our prayer request, often times for our world, our nation, and our community.

Together we end this prayer by praying the Lord’s Prayer. In praying the Lord’s Prayer together we are reminded of our communal identity as the church of Jesus Christ – only a part of the larger church. And in praying it we are learning to pray. Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer in response to the disciples request that he teach them to pray.

The next movement of our ‘order of worship’ is our *offering*. The offering is a continuation of the invitation to offer ourselves in response to God at work in our lives. We most often tie this part of the service to collecting the money – paying the bills. And our financial giving is an important part of our giving but our morning offering should invite us to offer all we are to God – realizing that all we have and all we are comes from God. So... our offering invites us to give of our time and talents as well as our financial gifts.

As we receive the offering first we moved to song – ‘praising the God from whom all blessings flow’ as we sing the *Doxology*. We then pray that God will accept our giving in the way it was given – (hopefully) – with a joyful heart. And as we *dedicate* that offering to being used (not to our benefit – but to God’s benefit). (Again, this is a really radical thing – because when we give to God – what we give becomes God’s not ours. So this building – it’s not our building – but it is God’s building. The mission of the church we give to is not our mission but God’s mission. This pastor who we support – he’s not our pastor – but God’s pastor.)

Our worship usually ends in song. This song, more often than not, is a song that calls us (as people renewed by our worship) to leave recommitted to serving God through the living of lives (which Paul calls an act ‘worship’).

But the end of worship is only the beginning – because as our worship helps form our response to God’s might – we recognize that we are called to live our lives in service of our God – to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is there that we recommit ourselves to lives of worship – service to God – that God acts once again bestowing his blessing on us – empowering us to live as his faithful people as the *benediction* or God’s blessing is given.

Who will we serve Joshua asks today – not only on our Sunday mornings but on all the days of our lives?

What will we devote ourselves to? Luke asks.

Worship is at the heart of our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Will we rededicate ourselves this day to making our worship – our corporate worship – our individual worship – the singing of our thanks and praise – and the living of the moments and days of all our lives – the center of our lives?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.