

"Growing in Worship"

Saint Mark PC

September 13, 2020

Psalm 137 asks a chilling question - "how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

God's people had been rooted from their lands and carried away into captivity into Babylon, there they sat by the river and wept remembering what they had lost. How could they sing songs of faith, and read their sacred text outside of their sanctuary, their temple? What meaning would their songs have in a foreign land in such a time?

In 2020,

Most houses of worship of all denominations and faiths have been asking and answering that question for the past 6 months. What is the meaning of worship, if we can't be together in our sacred space, our together space, our comfort zone?

Every church in our Presbytery, for instance, has responded with unique ways to re-imagine worship. We are thankful for our ability to gather in this way here at Saint Mark, and for the people who make it possible. Maybe the way we think of worship will be forever changed after we are beyond this current crisis.

But today, I wanted to think about worship not just as a gathering, but also as a spiritual discipline, a means by which we grow into connection with God through Christ..

To do so, just for a moment, let's go way back 500 years or so to a time when worship changed in a profound way that still influences us today.

As some of you know, two years ago, I was so fortunate to travel to Germany to see the great sights from the Reformation, as it pertained to Martin Luther now 503 years ago this coming October 31st.

(ON October 31st 1517, he placed his concerns on the door of the Collegiate church in Wittenburg, Germany - a church we were able to visit - and along with Philip Melancthon he literally changed the world. That is why we pause to remember the last Sunday of October each year the profound change that he helped bring about, and celebrate that new birth of the church which eventually emerged.)

(But I wanted us to think today about something we may all just take for granted after all these years. The Sermon Series we are in is called "Spiritual Growth". As a Presbyterian Church with our roots in the Reformation begun so long ago, we are growing in worship)

(What do I mean by that?)

The outworking of Luther's transformation of the church was the emphasis of corporate worship. This meant that one could read- and sing- in one's own language. The days of not being able to understand Latin or have access to knowledge were over. Martin Luther revolutionized *praise and worship* by teaching Christians how to read and sing.

Martin Luther wrote often about the importance of praising God through music and song. He said:

"Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. ... music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the

gift of song was given to humanity that they should proclaim the Word of God through Music.

"Next to theology I give music the highest place of honor. As long as we live there is never enough singing."

(Martin Luther wrote hymns and instituted singing- by the congregation- into all services. This was never done at that time in the Catholic Church. In fact, Luther wrote entire hymnals including carols for holidays. His influence on German hymnody was enormous; his repertoire included 37 hymns. *United Methodist Hymnal* editor Carlton R. Young remarked)

("His thirty-seven hymns and paraphrase are cast in simple, plain, and sometimes rough phrases and striking metaphors, qualities that are for the most part lost in English translations.")

Luther wrote hymns, and instituted singing into all services. He wrote five Christmas carols, initially for his children. He wrote *From Heaven on High* for his five-year-old son Hans, which was published a few years later. As part of his family's Christmas Eve devotions, the children sang in response to a man dressed as an angel. His hymns and carols are a testament to his creative celebration of music.

His most well-known hymn, "Ein' Feste Burg," otherwise known as, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, was based on Psalm 46 and Luther's own experiences. According to the *Psalter Hymnal Handbook*:

Stanzas 1-3 of the original text were inspired by Psalm 46; stanza 4 arose directly from Luther's persecution experience. The text expresses trust in God's providence.

(IF you would indulge me just a little more history, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* has been considered "the true National Hymn of Germany." It was sung on the

Leipzig battlefield in 1631 during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The famous nineteenth-century German poet, Heinrich Heine, considered this hymn comparable to France's national anthem, calling it, "the Marseillaise Hymn of the Reformation." It's still referred to as the Battle Hymn of the Reformation!)

The point is,

It is not possible for us to imagine worship today without singing and praising and worship bands and fellowship groups. But how do we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land - or a foreign space or a virtual space?

I want us for a moment to re-think worship as not only a gathering, but also really a spiritual discipline.

When we worship something life transforming happens to us.

I believe that in worship no matter where we are we get (at least) three things: The perspective of God, the presence of God and the power of God.

There's something about hearing the Word of God read or sung, or listening to the silence in prayer. It is the central act of our church, from which all the spokes of the wheel emerge, whether service, education, hospitality, fellowship - all grow out of worship.

ONE. When we worship God the first thing we receive is the perspective of God. As we have all had tough weeks, or we bring with us a feeling of anger or resentment, we come before Almighty God with who we are and the burdens we carry. Because as Paul says, worship is about change. We don't change ourselves, the pastor doesn't change us, it is the Holy Spirit of God who changes us. How? Because we get a new perspective and a new focus for life - ideally we get God's perspective.

Worship at its best can be an attitude alteration hour - we leave different from when we came. And if you have ever thought about the flow of worship, it supports that idea of change.

We begin with not our own words, but with praise of God, then we lead into an idea that we fall short of God's perfection - we speak the truth in love. We come to worship ready to blame everyone else, but then when faced with God's holiness we realize our faults as well.

A famous quote used by the cartoon Pogo was "We have met the enemy and they are us"

But then we move the service into hearing and proclaiming words of Scripture - through sermons, anthems, hymns, special music, just as Luther stressed the centrality of music. Reinhold Niebuhr once said that we are to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

There is great comfort in hearing the word of God, but there can also be a kind of "woke" experience, a call to action. It is a feeling that God meets us right at our point of need.

So then, we move to focus not on ourselves, but on others, as we pray for the church and the world, and offer our time and talents and treasure in response to God's word.

The flow of worship is designed to alter our perspective on reality.

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds", Paul says.

I remember in Pittsburgh Seminary, we would go to chapel every day between morning classes, for about 20 minutes or so, and it was a nice break from long lectures and so forth.

One friend of mine was walking out of chapel to go back to class and he said out loud, "Well back to reality for us!" And we heard one of our professors right behind us say - no this is reality, not what's out there -this is what God intended for us.

So worship gives us a new perspective.

TWO Worship gives us God's presence.

DO you have people in your life that when you are with them, you just feel differently? Whose presence is valuable to you?

God promises to be with us - in other words promises presence.

In recalling the 9/11 anniversary on Friday, I remember a time when I really felt God's presence - it was the Sunday after 9/11 in 2001 and I was serving a church in Florida, and as we were preparing for worship a Tropical Storm blew through and knocked out the power in the whole town. But it was so important that Sunday to gather, we went ahead and gathered in darkness in the sanctuary with no power, no air conditioning, and sang and listened and prayed and knew that while we were in darkness, we were also in God's care.

When we worship it is being in God's embrace, God's presence, as a living lord.

THREE We experience a kind of strength for living in worship. What does that mean? Well think of what Paul says here - present your bodies as a living sacrifice - Paul is saying take your everyday life, and present it as an offering to God. This is a transformative experience of worship.

So as we we get the perspective of God and the presence of God we also get a kind of strength - some call it a power of God as we worship. We can then bring all of that to everything we do through the week - not just

for an hour on Sunday - we can seek to transform mundane things into God moments.

Even the reformer John Calvin said, "Our work (what we do during the week) is an act of worship"

We go into that unreal world we take that new perspective, that presence, and even that power along with us.

So we will continue to sing the Lord's song - even in a strange environment, and grow in worship.

I appeal to you therefore brothers and sister by the mercies of God, present your selves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.