

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Worship

Fourth in a Series on The Psalms of Ascent

July 5, 2020

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Psalm 122

**I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”
Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together,
to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.**

Dear Friends in Christ,

- Overall Sermon Series Theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction
- Four weeks ago - Setting our hearts on pilgrimage
- Three weeks ago - Daily Repentance
- Two weeks ago - Divine Providence
- Today - Worship

I begin with two stories aimed at helping us understand why Sunday morning worship is worth the time, the energy, and the expense.

Story #1 is a memory I have of my dad spending long hours on a bright sunny day sharpening the blades on his seven foot John Deer sickle mower. There are a lot of reasons I'm a preacher and not a farmer. One of those reasons is watching my dad sit on a stool and listening to him sharpen blades with an old fashioned grindstone. I can remember thinking to myself, “hey dad it's time to make hay, our neighbors are cutting hay, why are you sitting here with this grindstone making this God awful sound, taking up all kinds of time and energy sharpening the blades?” Of course, good farmers like my dad knew what this teenage boy didn't know, it's well worth your time, it's a practical thing to do, to spend time sharpening a tool.

The kingdom of God is like a Christian man who takes time on bright sunny Sunday mornings to go to church. As he sits still and receives the gifts God is giving, his mind is sharpened in such a way that he is equipped in the week that lies before him, he is equipped to live out his vocations in a way that honors his Savior.

I have a similar memory of my father in law Lester working on painting projects with me on our house over the years. Lester was one of those people who liked to do things right the first time. Me not so much. If it were up to me, I'd scrape for a short time and early in the day get going on the slapping of paint on the wall. But Lester knew what my wife knew and what many of you know - it's well worth your time, it's a practical thing to do, to spend time and effort preparing a surface well before you begin painting.

The kingdom of God is like a Christian woman who takes time on Sunday mornings to prepare her heart for Holy Communion. She holds up the mirror of God's law, she examines her heart, she considers how she has fallen short of God's glory, she gets herself ready for the forgiveness of sins to sweep over her soul and to give her the peace only her Savior can give.

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So also today we ask a similar question about Divine Worship. Is it really worth the time and the effort to go to church regularly, and to take time and the expense involved in worshipping God? The Psalmist answers in verse 1, "I was glad when they said unto me. Let us go to the house of the Lord." Or as Eugene Peterson translates, "When they said, "Let's go to the house of the God," my heart leaped for joy.

Three answers to the question - *Why do our hearts leap for joy when it's time for worship?*

First, Because worship gives us a workable structure for life.

In the Old Testament God demanded this structure, that believers would work for six days and rest on the 7th day. In the New Testament, we are warned about the dangers of forsaking the assembling ourselves together, and Christ invites us again and again to bring all of our weariness and all of our burdens to Him and exchange them for the rest that only He can give. To rest in God's forgiveness is to have a peace that surpasses human understandings.

This is how one of our Lutheran Hymnals (1982) describes worship, "*The rhythm of our worship is from God to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them.*" *We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us his body to eat and his blood to drink. Finally his blessings moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition.*"

Worship gives us a workable structure to life. For the most part, everyone who worships does so because he or she wants to. There are some exceptions, to be sure. But for most Christians, worship is voluntary. Even though church attendance is declining nationwide, the numbers are impressive. In normal times, there are more people at worship on any given Sunday, than are at all the football games or golf links or fishing or taking walks in the woods. Worship is the single most popular act in this land.

Worship gives us a workable structure to life. The Psalm says that Jerusalem is a well built city. It was built as a place for worship. The three great worship festivals to which everyone came at least three times a year were held in Jerusalem. When you went to Jerusalem, you encountered the great foundational realities of life. God created you, God redeemed you, God has provided for you. In worship, although we have come from different places and out of various conditions, we are demonstrably after the same things, we are admitting that we have fallen short of God's glory, we are seeking the forgiveness of our sins, among us there is one baptism, one faith, one road that we follow, a common destination.

The very desire of Christians to assemble in their churches for worship during covid-19 has been controversial. Friends of ours have argued that Facebook livestreaming is good enough, that the Word of God is reaching more people than ever, and that churches should be very slow to open back up for in-person services. And while we want to respect that desire to be cautious and to be neighborly, it's also true that for many of us, a Sunday that

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doesn't include Divine Service is a Sunday that doesn't feel right, it is to begin a week that seems confusing and incomplete, or as my mom would say, discombobulated.

The kingdom of God is like an elderly woman who can't stop crying as she comes back into the house of God after months of being kept away. Tears of joy as she makes the sign of the cross and begins the service in the very presence of God. Tears of joy as her sins are declared to be washed away, tears of joy as the sermon helps her to give up the grudge she has been holding, tears of joy as the Spirit of God draws her close and closer to her Savior. Why do so many Christians keep returning to their chosen sanctuaries with hearts leaping for joy?

Secondly, Because worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God. Worship is the place where we obey the command to praise God. Psalm 122 says it this way, To give thanks to the name of God, this is what it means to be the Holy Christian Church. The folks who like to pay attention to scientists and to virus experts are recommending that if we do go to church we should refrain from singing. There are congregations and pastors who are refraining from singing, and while we want to respect their conclusions, this particular pastor just can't see it. Over 200 times in the Bible, the people of God are urged to sing to the Lord, to give thanks. Singing unto the Lord is as natural for Christians as breathing and eating and drinking is to all of humanity.

As often as we sin and mess up in life, which is daily, that often we find that God doesn't go off and leave us. He enters into our trouble, and He saves us. He lives among us in the flesh, He suffers all that we should have suffered, He dies the death we needed Him to die, He rose up again thereby proving that all of His promises are true. Again and again in Word and in Sacrament and in absolution, Christ forgives us, He holds us close, He declares us clean, He strengthens our faith.

Worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God. Some would argue that they can meet up with God in the beauty of nature, and there is some truth to that. You can meet up with God as creator in nature, but Jesus Christ as Savior is found only where He has promised to be found - in the preaching and teaching and remembering of His Word, in the splashing of baptismal waters, in the eating and drinking of the Supper.

Very often people don't feel like worshipping, and we may even say that it would be hypocritical to go into a place of worship and praise God when we don't feel like it. Eugene Peterson suggests that Psalm 122 is saying, "I don't care whether you feel like it or not...worship is commanded in the words "give thanks to the name of God." Peterson suggests that Christians worship because they want to, not necessarily because they feel like it. Quote, "Feelings are great liars. If Christians worshiped only when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship. Feelings are important in many areas but completely reliable in matters of faith."

Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Or as Paul writes to the Corinthians, "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." Peterson summarizes, "Worship is an act that develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God that is

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expressed in an act of worship. When we obey the command to worship God, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured.

The kingdom of God is like a man who goes to church even when he doesn't especially feel like going. Time after time, he finds those feelings shifting as he makes a joyful noise to the Lord, he finds those feelings shifting as the preaching of the Word speaks straight into his heart, he finds those feelings shifting as Christ holds him close in the Supper, forgives his sins, he imagines the angels of heaven rejoicing, he is invited to depart in peace.

Third, Because worship centers our attention on the decisions of God

The Psalmist describes worship as the place where thrones for righteous judgment are set. The Biblical word for judgment means "the decisive word by which God straightens things out and puts things right." Divine Service is that place where the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, are announced. Church isn't a place where we talk about the things of God, church is that place where God's Word does things, God's Word rebukes us, it saves us, it cleanses us, it moves us into action.

God's Word is everywhere in Divine Service. In the call to worship, we hear God's first word to us, in the Benediction, we hear God's final word, in the Scripture lessons and in the sermons, we hear carefully selected and prepared messages aimed at informing our minds, messages aimed at refreshing our memories. We are familiarized again and again with what God has decided and what He has promised.

Worship doesn't so much satisfy our hunger for God, it whets our appetites. It doesn't so much take care of our need for God's love, it deepens it. When the Psalmist prays for the peace of Jerusalem, and for those who love God to be secure, He is praying for worshippers to be relaxed. Relaxed in knowing that everything is alright because God is over us. Everything is alright because God is with us and He is for us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the security of being at home in a church with a cross at its center.

Peace be within your walls and security within your towers! For my brothers and companions sake, I will say, "Peace be within you!"

The kingdom of God is like an elderly woman who has been going to church for 80 plus years now. Sunday after Sunday, she takes all of her weariness and all of her worries and all of her worst fears into the sanctuary, she is still, she knows that God is God, her spirit is calmed, her conscience is cleansed, her soul is relaxed. She has peace not because she has life all figured out, but because the guilt of her sin and the power of her sin and the eternal consequences of her sin have been washed away in the blood of the Lamb. She has peace not because the world around her is settling down and is on track to be normal, but because her mansion in heaven is on reserve and her name is written in the book of the life. And with all of that in mind, she goes back out into her little corner of the world for one more week of practicing a long obedience in the same direction.