

Worship as Spiritual Formation

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

May 5, 2013

When our children were little, my work as a chaplain did not involve Sunday morning responsibilities, so I was able to attend worship in the congregations where Allan was pastor. During those years, there were many times when I wondered why I bothered coming to church, as I spent the majority of the morning in the nursery with our children. My goal was always to stay in the sanctuary long enough to sing the first 2 hymns that followed the Call to Worship and opening prayer. It was a good morning if I could stay a little longer than that! Even after we made the move from the nursery to the sanctuary, my time during the service was spent keeping the children busy with activities to keep them quiet. Again, my goal was always to sing the hymns.

So why did I bother going to church in those years? I remember consciously making the decision to go to church so that I wouldn't get out of the habit of going, and so that our children would get into the habit of going. Being present for worship was a habit, a discipline, a practice that I wanted to engage in, even if there was no immediate "benefit". In fact, the most obvious benefit would have been to stay at home and avoid the hassle of getting myself and everyone ready for church.

There was also the communal aspect of going to church. While I wasn't able to get a lot out of the worship services, I did connect with other parents of young children in the nursery; and during coffee time and Sunday School, I was able to connect with other adults in the church. It was a reminder that I wasn't alone on this Christian journey, that I joined other sisters and brothers on this same journey of trying to follow Christ in the midst of hectic and chaotic lives.

This is the last sermon in a series on worship, using texts from the book of Revelation as our guide. The text this morning is from close to the end of John's vision. In it, he has a vision of the New Jerusalem, a city filled with the glory of God. The streets are made of pure gold and transparent as glass. Its foundations are adorned with every jewel and the gates are pearl. In this city,

there is no temple, for God and the Lamb are its temple. There is no need of light, for God is its light. The gates are never shut; people and rulers will bring into it all the glory and honour of the nations. In this city there is also a river of life flowing from the throne of God through the streets of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in this city, and all God's servants will worship God; they will see God's face, and God's name will be on their foreheads.

This is a wonderful image of a new time, given to people who had lost their hope in the midst of Roman occupation. This is an image of a time when Emperor Caesar will rule no more, but God and the Lamb who saves them will rule with peace and justice. As people of God gathered together, they could proclaim confidently that Jesus is Lord, such a radical statement compared to what they were required to utter in the streets--that Caesar is Lord. In their weekly worship, they gathered under a different Lord, marked by a different name, giving their allegiance to a different ruler, a compassionate God, rather than a tyrannical ruler. And this weekly time of gathering was important to them, reminding them that their allegiance was to someone and something different than they heard all week. Rather than worshipping Caesar, they worshipped God.

Our English word for worship is an old English compound word, made up of 2 words: *weorth* and *scipe*, meaning worth/worthiness and create/ascribe. These 2 words together mean ascribing worth. That is what we do in worship--we ascribe worth when we direct our lives and our attention towards God. (Kreider and Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, p. 28) "When we ascribe worth we reveal what preoccupies us, what we ultimately value, what is most important in our lives." (p. 28) So when we come to worship, we come to ascribe worth to God, for God is worthy of our praise and our thanksgiving. This is fairly radical, because from Monday to Saturday, there are many things that preoccupy us. Our daily routines and activities tell us what we ultimately value and what we give importance to in our lives, and during the week, it is primarily our work, our studies, our families, our friends, our vehicles, and anything else that takes up our time.

But on Sundays, in the act of coming to worship, we re-align ourselves, we re-focus our attention on God, because God is worthy of our praise and our thanksgiving. It is as if we hit the re-set button on a weekly basis, pausing from the rest of our lives, altering our routines to come to this place, and engage in rituals and activities that only happen here: communal singing, corporate sharing and prayer, hearing God's story, a ritual meal, focused listening, silence, candle lighting.

This weekly rhythm, over time, year in and year out, forms us and shapes us into the people of God. It re-orientates us from a focus on ourselves and all the things that the world tells us is important, to a focus on God, and God's mission in the world. Weekly, we hear stories of how God acted in the history of God's people--stories of persecution, of failure, of faithfulness, of exile, of promise, of hope. And weekly, we are given the opportunity to envision how those stories of old continue to be lived out in our lives and in our world. God was present and active in history--how is God present and active in my life, in our life together, in our community, in our world? And how is the hope of what God will do in the future evident to us today? As we ascribe worth to God, we open our eyes, our ears, our hearts to hear and see how this God who is worthy of our praise, is alive and active in our world. The story of God in the world is a story of God's mission to bring about the reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth. This story of Shalom is evident in our scriptures, and is being enacted in our world today, if we only have eyes to see it.

And it is being enacted in this congregation and in every congregation where God's people gather to ascribe worth and praise to God. For really, where else in our lives, do we gather with people who are so different from us? Where in our world, do people who disagree on politics, economics, and anything else that people disagree about, where else do they voluntarily gather to sing with one voice, and pray with one voice. Each week, when we gather as God's people, we sit side by side with those with whom we disagree, perhaps even people who we really do not even like. And each week, we are given the opportunity to offer them the peace of Christ, to extend to them the hand of fellowship, to breathe with them as we sing our hymns, to hold them in prayer and have them hold us in prayer as we testify

to the ways in which we have been or experienced the light of Christ in our lives, or not been or experienced the light of Christ in our lives.

Individually, we are each created in the image of God, but it isn't until we gather together in worship, that we see the image of God in all its fullness, complexity and richness. Individually, we each know what the call of God looks like for us, but it isn't until we gather corporately, that we see the many and varied ways in which God calls people. And it is that complex and varied body that makes up the people of God, who together join God's mission of reconciliation in the world.

We gather as people of God, diverse and motley, to offer our praises to God who is worthy of our praise, even sometimes in the midst of suffering and sadness. Our praises are mingled with our laments for all the ways in which God's mission of reconciliation is still so far off. And yet, we can continue to offer our praise, for we know from experience that after suffering comes joy, that after crying comes laughter, and so we offer praise in the midst of lament and alongside lament, for we have heard the Big Story of how God has acted in history, and of how God will continue to act. The Big Story points us in the direction of hope and justice and Shalom.

And each week, we hear the little stories of how God is at work in our lives, as we give testimony to where we have seen God at work--in our lives, in our families, in our places of study and work, in our communities. Each week, during our sharing time, we tell our own stories, offering our own praises for where we have experienced our story joining with God's story, or asking for prayers to see how our story fits into God's story. It is hearing the Big Story and all the little stories that help us to believe--believe in God, who is worthy of our praise; believe in God's mission in the world, even though we can't always see it; believe in our place in God's mission and our ability to hear and join in God's call to embody and live out this mission of reconciliation.

Each week, we gather in praise of the God who is worthy of our praise, to be renewed, to be re-oriented and to be re-minded toward God and God's mission. Worship helps us remember that God is God and we are not. Worship forms and transforms us from people who think and live as if the success of the world and of our lives lies solely within our own power, to

people who can trust that the welfare of the world and our own welfare lies with the One who is all-compassion, all mercy and all-knowing. It is God who carries us and our world, and holds the vision and the mission, and it is we who join in with what God has already done, is doing and will continue to do.

So, why do we come to worship week after week? We come so that we won't get out of the habit of coming. But more than that, we come to give praise and glory to the One who is worthy of our praise; and we come to be reminded of who we are and who God is. Worship shapes us and forms us into believers whose lives grow more and more into a fuller reflection of Jesus. Worship shapes us so that we can live lives that are oriented toward God and God's mission in the world.

"I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." Let it be so.