

## **Worship 1: God's Worthiness**

### **January 11, 2009 – Worship**

Worship is at the center of our life together as a congregation. Fellowship is important, and we do love eating together and talking. And I know there are some of you who have a passion for mission. But I think the center of who we are is best experienced as we gather to sing, to pray, to worship. Because of its centrality, it is good from time to time to remind ourselves what worship is and what worship is all about. We are going to spend the next few weeks looking more closely at worship in general, and our worship services in particular. Today we are going to try to answer some of the basic questions about worship.

The first question is “What is Worship.” Our English word “worship” goes back to an Old Saxon word combination “weorth – scipe.” The first part of the word, “Weorth,” in addition to becoming what we mean by worth, was linked to the idea of honor. Among other things, “scipe” was to “make or shape.” Thus “weorthscipe” was to make honor for someone, or to proclaim someone’s worth. Worship is therefore an attitude and activity designed to recognize and describe the worth of someone. In Christian worship, the someone we are honoring and recognizing is God. To worship is to proclaim and celebrate the worth of God, to honor God for who he is as well as to honor God for what he has done for us.

This idea is underlined by the Greek and Hebrew words used for worship in the Old and New Testaments. Words like, bow down, bend the knee, prostrate are all used to describe worship and are sometimes translated as worship. The story of the wise men coming to Jesus says that the wise men knelt down when they finally found Jesus. And the word translated several times in this passage as “pay homage” or in earlier translations as “worship,” is based on the root for bend the knee. When I was young, I was taught that a gentleman stands whenever someone enters a room. This was a way to show respect. In biblical times, if a person was more than a rung or two above you on the social ladder, you showed respect, not by standing, but by kneeling before that person. In the eastern part of the biblical world, if the person were very much higher on the ladder you would bow down and touch your head to the ground. That was

the way of showing respect and honor. This came to be part of the concept and vocabulary of worship, because worship was showing honor and respect to God.

In the call to worship from Revelation 4, John is witnessing heavenly worship. And in that vision even the heavenly beings bow down before God in honor and respect. They place their golden crowns before God as an act of showing how much God was worth in comparison to themselves. Just like on earth, heavenly worship is recognizing and proclaiming the worth and honor of God.

After the “what question” we can move on to the “who?” Who is worship for? The answer is God! If worship is proclaiming the worth of God and honoring God, God is the one to whom worship is aimed. You can see that in the Isaiah 6 passage that formed the framework of our prayer of confession – the angels themselves focused their songs of praise upon God – Holy, holy, holy. In Matthew 2, the wise men bow down and worship Jesus, not Mary and Joseph. And in the Revelation 4 passage, the focus of worship is upon the one seated on the heavenly throne. Worship on earth and in heaven is for God.

Some people think of worship like a play in a theater. For them the pastor and the choir are the actors, while the congregation is the audience. Since a play is done for the audience, this way of thinking about worship is thought of in terms of being for the congregation. The Danish theologian/philosopher Kierkegaard uses this imagery of theater for worship, but he casts the parts differently. The congregation is understood to be the main actors. The pastor and choir take on the jobs of stage managers and pit orchestra, helping the actors and actresses to perform. And God is the audience, sitting in heaven watching the drama of worship take place. This is the way the Bible understands worship. Worship is for God, and is something that everyone involved in worship does for God.

Now that is not saying that we human beings don't get something out of worship. We can learn and grow in our faith through the experience of worship. But the focus and the purpose of worship is not how we feel, or whether we have a nice warm glow as we drive home. The focus is on God, not on us. This is the way the Reformed Church Directory of Worship begins:

“Worship is the action of acknowledging God’s worth. Penitence, forgiveness, joy, a growth in Christian knowledge – all may and should happen while at worship, but are the results of the central meaning and action of worship: the acknowledgement of God’s worth.” Worship is primarily for God!

What is worship? Worship is honoring God and proclaiming his worth. Who is worship for? Worship is for God! The next question is why do we worship? The bottom line for this answer is that worship is what we are created for. We were brought into being to live in relationship to God and with God. And because of God’s nature, because of God’s greatness, a natural part of that relationship involves honoring God and responding to that greatness. It is interesting in this regard, that the first two of the ten commandments deal with worship and proclaiming God’s uniqueness and greatness. And Christ’s summary of the law begins with “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.” And how is such great love expressed? In Worship! The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is the Presbyterian equivalent of the Heidelberg Catechism, begins with the question, “What is the chief end of man?” Which is an Elizabethan way of asking, “What is the purpose of human beings?” And the answer is, “Man’s chief end is to Glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Worship is at the core of our being, and is what we were made to do.

There are other reasons to worship as well. We have talked about how God’s character, who God is, as a reason to worship. But what God has done for us is also a reason to worship. God has created us. God has redeemed us. God provides for us daily. Worship is a fitting way to respond to those wonderful acts of God. The wise men, as they saw the star above Bethlehem as they were leaving Jerusalem, were filled with great joy. When they found Jesus soon after that, the way they expressed that joy was worship. The Psalms even indicate that when there is no joy, when we are troubled or in trouble, worship is the way to go. Many of the Psalms praise God’s greatness, God’s control of life and history, and then add “HELP!” There are many reasons for us to worship.

What is worship? Honoring God and proclaiming God's worth. Who s worship for? God! Why do we worship? Because that is how God made us, and the feelings and experiences of our lives lead us to worship. When and where do we worship? In addition to Sunday mornings from 11 to a little after 12 in special buildings, all of our lives should be a type of worship. How do we proclaim God's worth? We can do that by singing a hymn about God, and we can do that by following God's will. Following God's directions for life shows that we think God is important enough to give us guidance. Living in loving relationships can be a way of declaring God's worth, as it says God's love is so important we want to reflect it in our lives. Working on our computers, fixing dinner, studying for an exam, can be ways of proclaiming that God has given us tasks to do in life and we are doing them. On Sundays we worship with our voices and our hearts within the building God has given us. The rest of the week we worship with our hands and our feet, in the midst of the people God has made and in the midst of God's world.

What, who, why, when, and where? That leaves how. That is the question we will be answering in the coming weeks. Amen.