

"Jubilant Worship of a Great God"

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, October 29, 2006

Text: Psalm 100:1-5

Hebrews 10:19-25

NRSV

THE RHYTHM OF WORSHIP

When I was a child, my family and I attended Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church in Charlotte. The church was located in a residential neighborhood, about a mile from our home. On many spring and fall Sunday mornings when the weather was pleasant, my father, my brother, Glen, and I would walk to Sunday School. I never knew what Mama was doing at home, whether she was cleaning up after breakfast, making some preparations for lunch, arranging her hair, or what. It seemed like about the time we would arrive at the church, Mama would drive up in the parking lot.

It was a great experience for me to walk to church as a child. For Daddy and Mama, going to church was a joyous activity. It was something to anticipate with excitement. That attitude had a profound influence on Glen and me. Daddy could have written the verse in Psalm 122 that reads, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"

I remember when we would visit my grandmother in Mullins, South Carolina, during the weekend. Often we would travel back to Charlotte on Sunday afternoon in time to attend the Sunday evening worship service. It was important to worship God.

The psalmist exclaims, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth."

(100:1) We are to joyfully praise God. Fortunately, we don't have to be excellent singers to make a joyful noise. We don't always have to sing on key. Before one mealtime when our children, Andy and Sarah were young, my family and I were all singing the "Doxology" as a blessing for the meal. When we finished, Melody started laughing. I look at her puzzled, wondering why she was laughing. She said that I had sung the blessing in three different keys. I may have done that, but I was definitely making a joyful noise.

The psalmist says, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord." Almighty God alone is worthy of our worship. When we worship anything besides God, we get into trouble spiritually, because our lives are out of balance.

The psalmist advises, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us." Other versions emphasize that, adding, "And not we ourselves." God made us. We did not make ourselves. Many people today seem to believe the popular saying, "It's my life to live." However, genuine life is found in submission to God. In biblical terms, to live is to praise God, and to praise God is to live.

Worship is part of a significant rhythm. God acts, and we respond.

A W. Tozer gave this definition of worship: "Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, that Majesty which philosophers call the First Cause, but which we call Our Father who art in heaven.

We respond to God through dynamic, hopeful worship. This is a part of our new vision for our church – that we respond to God through dynamic, hopeful worship. We respond to what God has done. The psalmist tells us what God has done. God has created us. God has demonstrated his goodness, his steadfast love and his faithfulness that endures to all generations.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that God loves us so

much that he has sent his Son to offer his life for us. He writes, "Therefore my friends, . . . we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus." (Hebrews 10:19) We can worship with confidence because Jesus has paid the price for our sin with his death on the cross.

Our worship is dynamic. We are seeking to connect with God. God speaks to us. We listen and also speak to God. For worship to be dynamic, we don't have to be jumping up and down. We can be singing joyfully. We can be dancing vigorously. We can also be meditating prayerfully. Those are all dynamic acts of worship. Something is happening in the connecting between God and us.

Our worship is hopeful. It is hopeful because we recognize who God is and what God has done in the past. God provides us with hope for the future.

We worship because it nurtures our need to be in relationship with God. Worship is the place where we obey the command to praise God.

When we sin and mess up our lives, we find that God doesn't go off and leave us. He enters into our trouble and saves us. That is good! We discover reasons and motivations for living in faith, and find that God is already helping us to do it, and that is good. Praise God!

St. Augustine wrote, "A Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot." That is the reality. That is the truth of our lives. God made us, redeems us, and provides for us. The natural, honest, healthy, logical response to that is praise to God. When we praise, we are functioning at the center. We are in touch with the basic, core reality of our being.

GOD'S ACTIVITY IN OUR LIVES

Consider God's activity in our lives. The psalmist proclaims, "Know that

the Lord is God.” (100:3) The Lord is all-powerful, all-knowing. God is sovereign. He intends the best for us.

Beyond that, “it is he that made us.” God is our Creator. God made each of us – with our individual physical characteristics, our talents and abilities, and our unique personalities.

“We are his.” James Mays writes that this verse, “dramatically suggests that the question of human identity begins and ends with God.” We are his. “We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” You belong to God’s family. I belong to God’s family. What better place to be is there?

The psalmist continues, “For the Lord is good.” I was not very old when my parents taught me that familiar blessing before meals: “God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. . . .” God is good.

“His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” (100:5) My grandfather was a farmer in eastern South Carolina. He lived out his days trusting God for his crops to grow, so that he and his family could eat. Granddaddy also led his family to honor, obey and worship God. When Sunday came, they were going to be at the Sellers Methodist Church worshipping God. Granddaddy struggled through the Great Depression, and experienced several tragedies in his life. Yet God was faithful to him and gave him the strength and fortitude to overcome those tragedies.

My Uncle David lost his wife several weeks ago. I talked with him last week by telephone. He told me that it was hard to live by himself in his home. He and Aunt Jane were married for 53 years. There are four siblings remaining in my mother’s family: Uncle David, Uncle Mitchell, Aunt Tricia and Mama. Each of them faces struggles and challenges in their lives. Yet God is faithful to them. God comforts them in their grief and empowers them to live in the face of illness.

Then there is my generation. God’s faithfulness endures. God

strengthens my brother, Glen, and me to honor and obey him in our lives.

There is a generation following mine. What a comfort it is to me to realize that God's steadfast love and faithfulness will extend throughout Andy and Sarah's lives. God will be there for them, to help guide and strengthen them until the day they die. "God's steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

LET YOUR BALLOON GO!

Because of all that God does for us, we worship him. We respond to God through dynamic, hopeful worship.

The psalmist implores us to "worship the Lord with gladness." (100:2) Some people find it difficult to be glad about anything. A man stopped at a café and ordered a cup of coffee. When the waitress brought it, he tried to make conversation. He ventured, "Looks like rain, doesn't it?" The waitress snapped, "I can't help what it looks like. It's still coffee!"

Someone once told me about two pessimists who met at a party. Instead of shaking hands, they shook their heads.

The psalmist declares, "Worship the Lord with gladness . . . Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." (100:2, 4)

We can worship God even when we don't emotionally feel gladness. Eugene Peterson has an interesting point of view on this subject. He writes, "We think that if we don't feel something there can be no authenticity in doing it. God's wisdom says something different. We can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is an act which develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God which is expressed in an act of worship.

Throughout worship God speaks to us and we respond. It is dynamic. In the responsive greeting or introit, we hear God's first word to us. In the benediction and choral response, we hear God's last word to us. In the Scripture lessons, we hear God speaking to our ancestors. In the children's sermon and the sermon we hear that word re-expressed to us. In the hymns, which are often more or less paraphrases of Scripture, the word of God makes our prayers articulate. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, the water is a symbol of cleansing and new birth in Christ. The vivid symbols of the bread and the cup in Holy Communion demonstrate that Jesus graciously invites sinners like us to a meal with him. The meal is a powerful symbol of redemption.

Every time we worship our minds are informed, and our memories are refreshed with the truths of God. We are familiarized with what God says, what he has decided, and the ways he is working out our salvation.

There is simply no place where this can happen as well as in worship. If we stay at home by ourselves and read the Bible, we are going to miss a lot, for our reading will be unconsciously distorted by our culture, limited by our ignorance, and distorted by unnoticed prejudices. In worship we are part of "the large congregation" where all the writers of Scripture address us, and where hymn writers use music to express truths which touch us not only in our heads but in our hearts. The preacher, who has just lived through six days of doubt, hurt, faith and blessing with the worshipers, speaks the truth of Scripture in the language of the congregation's present experience. We want to hear what God says and what God says to us. Worship is the place where our attention is centered on these personal and decisive words of God.

When Leonardo da Vinci had painted his immortal "Last Supper," he asked a friend for an evaluation. The friend expressed how magnificent it was. He especially praised the wine cup by the Lord's hand. At that point, Leonardo

blotted out the cup. Leonardo answered, “Nothing should distract one’s attention from the Lord.” That is a goal of worship.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews proclaims that worship is too important not to do it. He writes, “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)

So we come to church and seek to worship God with everything that we are. The psalmist in the final psalm instructs us to praise God with everything we can imagine: trumpet, lute, harp; tambourine and dance; strings and pipe; cymbals, loud clashing cymbals. Don’t hold anything back! (Psalm 150:3-5)

The Rev. Bruce Larson, a Presbyterian pastor, tells about leading a renewal conference in a great, Gothic, cathedral-like Presbyterian church in Omaha, Nebraska. As people entered the sanctuary, they were given a balloon filled with helium. They were told to release it at some point in the service where they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts. It could be during the anthem, a hymn, the prayers, the sermon, at any time.

Larson remarks that since they were Presbyterians, they were not free to say “Hallelujah” or “Praise the Lord.” Letting go of the balloon would represent praise going up to God. So all through the service, a various times, brightly-colored balloons would rise up and bounce off the ceiling – visual symbols of praise to God. Oddly enough, when the service was over, about a third of those balloons were still unreleased. Those worshippers either felt no joy or could not bring themselves to express it.

Worship is the time for us to offer our praise and thanksgiving to God, to respond to God for all that he has done for us. Worship is the time for us to let our balloons go. Let your balloons go!

Closing prayer: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Amen.