

"Revering a Holy God"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, September 2, 2007

Text: Psalm 84:1-12 Revelation 7:4-12 NRSV

Opening prayer: Almighty and gracious God, open our hearts to hear and receive your words of truth for us today, so that we may respond with praise and worship. Amen.

I heard about a golfer who was 20 minutes late at the first tee one Sunday morning. The other three members on the regular foursome were almost ready to drive off without him. He finally arrived and explained why he was late. He said, "I agreed with my wife that this Sunday I'd toss a coin to see whether I played golf or went to church. And you know, fellows, I had to toss that coin 43 times before it came up heads."

There are some people who are more excited about coming to worship than other people!

When we come to worship, we have the chance to meet God. How do you prepare to meet an important person? A really important person, like Governor Mike Easley, for example? We would want to look our best. It would be good for us to get plenty of sleep the night before. It would be helpful for us to become knowledgeable about the person, to read about his background.

In the same way, it is important for us to prepare to meet God in worship. In worship we encounter a holy, living God.

In our Old Testament lesson, the psalmist proclaims, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." (Psalm 84:1-2)

Worship and a relationship with God are very important to the psalmist. It reminds me of the words of Psalm 42: “My soul thirsts for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:2)

Many people desire a meaningful relationship with the living God. We cannot make it happen. We have to simply let it happen. On the other hand, there are certain things that we can do to facilitate it happening. One of those things is coming to worship.

The psalmist continues, “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.” (84:4) It is a joy to come to God’s sanctuary to sing praises to his name. There are people in our congregation who make a tremendous effort to come to worship every Sunday. You see them. Some people who walk with walkers. Other people struggle with less obvious physical conditions. For some people it takes hours of preparation to get here. But they make the effort. They struggle. They come to worship. What an inspiration you are to me!

Listen to these words of the psalmist as he talks to God: “A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.” (84:10) A day in God’s courts is better than a thousand days somewhere else. What could be so good to the psalmist about being in the Temple courts?

William Temple was the Archbishop of Canterbury. He once gave a masterful definition of worship. “Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

That is worship. Part of our church’s vision is to respond to God with dynamic, hopeful worship. We seek to provide a channel, a setting, an experience, so that there is a meeting between God and God’s people. Where something is happening. Where there is a connection.

That is what makes it dynamic.

We also seek to give people hope for their lives. We were all horrified by the news reports of the Minneapolis interstate highway bridge collapse last month. The first real hope I experienced in that ongoing story was in reading about the many prayer services held in a wide variety of Christian churches the following Sunday – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. It was a mixture of gratitude, recovery from shock, grief, support for the bereaved families and relief workers, and anxiety about other bridges. In the context of worship, it was hopeful, because the people could rely on God to help them. They could meet God in worship.

The Bible records an incredible episode of worship after the Temple constructed during the reign of King Solomon was completed. All the levitical singers, arrayed in fine linen, were carrying cymbals, harps and lyres. They stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters. It was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. They began singing and playing, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord. When they sang, “For God is good, for his steadfast love endures forever,” the house of the Lord was filled with a cloud. The priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. Wow! (II Chronicles 5:10-14)

What an incredible experience! We worship the Lord of all creation, the Creator of the universe, who has redeemed us through Jesus Christ and who empowers us every day through the Holy Spirit. Just to catch a glimpse of his majesty would overwhelm us.

In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard writes about the power of an encounter with the living God: “Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash

us to our pews.”

Dillard believes that few people have a clue how vivid and powerful worship can be.

Try to see it with me the way that the apostle John saw it in a vision from the Lord Jesus. He recorded it in the book of Revelation. Thousands of people from every tribe of the people of Israel have gathered around the throne of God. A great multitude, far too many people to count, has come from every nation, from all peoples and languages. They stand before the throne. They are waving palm branches in adoration and praise. Everyone cries out in a voice that says, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:10)

Then all the angels of heaven gather around the throne of God. They fall on their faces before the throne and worship. They sing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Can you hear them singing? Can you see them praising God? Can you feel it? Hallelujah!

Think about the toughest problem in your life today, the situation that is bothering you the most.

How difficult does it seem next to the majesty of God pictured by John?

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” Amen!