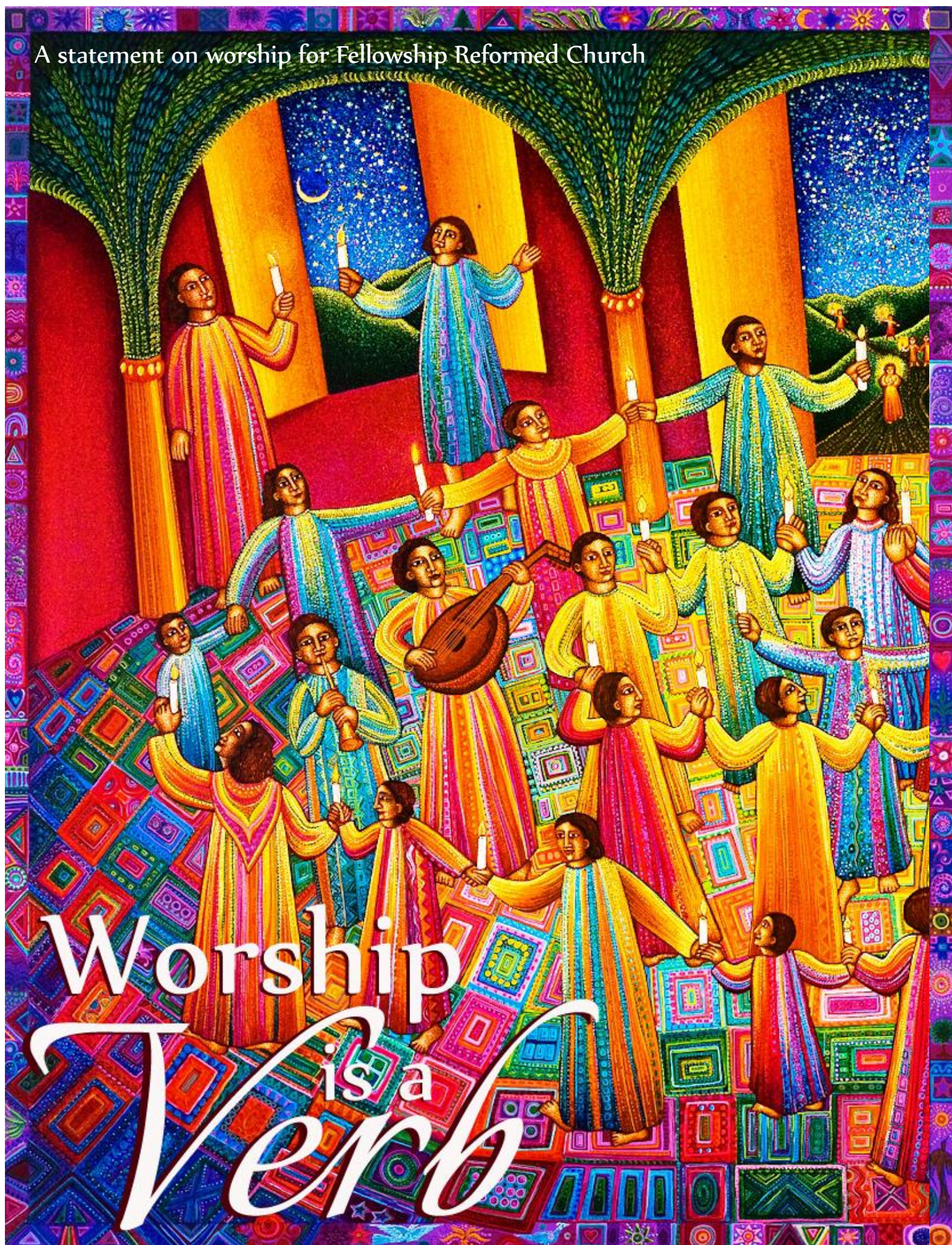


A statement on worship for Fellowship Reformed Church



Worship  
is a  
Verb

# A statement on worship for Fellowship Reformed Church

We are not our own, but belong to God in Jesus Christ.<sup>i</sup> When we gather as a community for worship, we are living into our identity and our calling as the Body of Christ in and for the world.<sup>ii</sup>

Worship is first and foremost about God's action. Worship is not possible without the work of the Holy Spirit within us nor is it acceptable to God without Christ's mediation. Therefore, our role in worship is to respond in gratitude to the work that the triune God has done in history and is doing in and through each of us.

Worship in community is a central means of transformation for God's people. We affirm that our primary goal in worship is not to receive, but to offer our whole selves and all that we have to God and to one another. For this reason, we seek to worship in such a way that invites the highest level of thoughtful and heartfelt participation through the creative use of structures, music, creeds, and prayers that are historic and current, local and global.

**We affirm that  
our primary goal  
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to God and to one another.**

Worship gives us a glimpse of God's kingdom fully realized on earth; a kingdom where all of creation is restored, all people participate in God's Story, and God's glory floods the earth.

<sup>i</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A #1

<sup>ii</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25

<sup>iii</sup> Psalm 19:1-4

<sup>iv</sup> John 4:22-24

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 18:20

<sup>vi</sup> Galatians 3:26-28

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 19:13-14

<sup>viii</sup> Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>ix</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>x</sup> Romans 12:1

<sup>xi</sup> Numbers 6:23-27

<sup>xii</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>xiii</sup> Isaiah 58:6-7

<sup>xiv</sup> Galatians 5:22-24

# In worship, God acts. We respond.

## **God gathers.**

- The holy and triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) initiates, enables, and perfects our worship.
- God calls all creation<sup>iii</sup> and all people to encounter God and to worship in spirit and in truth.<sup>iv</sup>

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...with praise and thanksgiving.<sup>v</sup>
- ⇒ ...by declaring God's holiness, recognizing our brokenness, and giving thanks for God's grace.
- ⇒ ...by welcoming and celebrating the great company of Christians from all *times* and *places*<sup>vi</sup> who are of every age<sup>vii</sup>, status, culture, and ability.

## **God speaks.**

- God gathers us to worship in order that we might hear from God, remember God's Story, and be further transformed into the likeness of Christ.<sup>viii</sup>
- Hearing from God through scripture and spoken word is a central act of our worship.

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by giving thanks for God's work of salvation both now and throughout history.
- ⇒ ...by choosing through the power of the Spirit, to participate in God's Story by living lives that are being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

## **God feeds.**

- In the sacraments (baptism and communion), God causes us to remember the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.
- God calls us to commune with Christ who remains with us always.
- God gives us hope by offering a foretaste of the kingdom of God on earth.
- God adopts, cleanses, and nourishes us for participation in God's mission in the world.

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by seeking spiritual nourishment in the sacraments.<sup>ix</sup>
- ⇒ ...by giving thanks for God's transformational work of redemption, renewal, and resurrection.
- ⇒ ...by presenting our world to God in prayer and offering our lives as living sacrifices for the sake of the world.<sup>x</sup>

## **God sends.**

- God blesses us, puts his name upon us, and sends us into the world to participate in God's Story.<sup>xi</sup>

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by living worshipful lives of grateful obedience that seek to make disciples of all nations,<sup>xii</sup> pursue justice, feed the hungry, care for those in need<sup>xiii</sup>, and bear the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>xiv</sup>

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

## Worship is a Verb: Getting in on the Action

January 4, 2015  
Jordan Clegg

“Worship is a Verb.” What is meant by this title is that worship is full of activity and relationship. As you might recall, a verb is an action or a relationship between two things. Worship then, is a primary relational act between God and humanity. Worship is the primary way we practice our faith and become more like Christ. Worship is where we learn what it means to be a disciple. At the core of discipleship and what we do in worship is this pattern: God acts and we respond. A primary way that we respond to God in worship is through singing. Listen again to how the Psalmist begins Psalm 96:

*Sing to the LORD a new song;*

*Sing to the LORD, all the earth.*

*Sing to the LORD, bless the name of the LORD;*

*Proclaim God’s salvation from day to day.*

*Declare God’s glory among the nations*

*And God’s wonders among all peoples.*

*For Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...*

If liturgy is “the work of the people,” then when we show up to worship it is for more than to merely recharge our batteries or learn something new; we have a job to do.

This is just one of many calls that scripture makes for God’s people to sing praises and make music to God. In fact, this is not just a call, but a command. And yet, singing has become a point of concern for many pastors and worship leaders that have begun to notice a decline in congregational song. Choirs are scarce. Congregations are falling silent. John Bell, a gifted song leader that serves the Iona Community in Scotland, says that 1 in 4 people today believe they cannot sing. Why is this? Maybe it is because of a culture of performance that has crept into our worship. Maybe we’ve bought into the idea that worship is meant to be observed and enjoyed as a concert rather than the “work of God’s people.” After all, despite all the baggage tied to the word liturgy, it simply means is this: “the work of the people.” Maybe our worship spaces favor the spoken word over singing. Maybe some of us feel the songs are too high, too low, too fast, too slow, too new, or too old. Maybe some of us feel we shouldn’t sing out of pity for our neighbor who might not appreciate our offering. Maybe there are others of us for whom the singing is simply too painful and stirs up difficult memories. Whatever the reasons are that keep us from singing, the fact remains that scripture commands us to sing, and yet many of us choose not to.

And so, it seems appropriate to begin a conversation on worship by talking about participation, namely through singing. If liturgy is “the work of the people,” then when we show up to worship it is for more than to merely recharge our batteries or learn something new; we have a job to do. So why is singing such an important part of our work in worship?

Singing connects us with the ongoing worship of heaven and all creation. Worship does not begin with us. When we gather together to worship what we are actually doing is joining in worship that is already happening in heaven. The writer of the book of Revelation gives witness to this when he speaks of angels singing God’s praise:

*Day and night without ceasing [the angels] sing:*

*“Holy, holy, holy,*

*The Lord God Almighty,*

*Who was and is and is to come.” (Revelation 4:8)*

One of the awesome truths about worship is that the line between heaven and earth begins to get very blurry when we gather. When we sing it is as if we ascend just a little closer to heaven, while heaven descends just a little closer to us.

Singing builds community. Whether you think you are good at it or not singing is something that everyone can do. Singing together binds us up with one another like nothing else. Not only are we united with our brothers and sisters in this room, but singing unites us with our brothers and sisters all around the globe and throughout all of history. Think about the significance of singing in solidarity with Christians from Zimbabwe when we sing:

*Uyai mose tinamate mwari...uyai mose zvino.*

Consider also the implications of the text and tune of the beloved hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King.”

*All creatures of our God and King, lift up you voice and with us sing. Alleluia, Alleluia!*

Here we have a text written by Saint Francis of Assisi in the year 1225, translated to English in 1906, set to a tune written 1623 and still sung by us today using modern instruments and arrangements by living composers like David Crowder. Truly, singing together reminds of that we are part of a community that spans both the globe and the ages.

Listen again to the psalmist:

*Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,*

*ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;*

*bring an offering, and come into his courts.*

*Worship the LORD in holy splendor;*

*tremble before him, all the earth.*

Research has shown that choirs, when singing together, begin to have synchronized heartbeats. Researchers even found that when singing together in unison, singers heartbeats even speed up and slow down at the same rate. I find this to be fascinating on a physical level, and I find it even more compelling on a spiritual level. What if our singing together caused our hearts to begin to beat as one? Let’s take it a step further. What if our singing together caused our hearts to beat in time with Christ’s heart who himself worships with us and for us?

Of course there are those of us with physical impairments, or emotional pain that make it difficult to sing. There are even some around the world who cannot sing due to a fear of persecution. But here lies part of the importance of a community singing together: we sing on behalf of those who truly cannot. For those of us who simply do not like to sing, perhaps this is your reason for singing. Sing for the parents who lost a child too soon and can’t sing because the pain is too deep or the anger too raw. Sing for the one who wants to sing but cannot because their body is ravaged by ALS or quadriplegia. Sing for Middle Eastern Christians who cannot sing for fear of persecution or death by the soldiers that hunt them. The truth is, none of us truly sings for only ourselves. We are called to

**What if our singing  
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sing on behalf of the world. Paul puts it this way in Romans:

*"...we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another." (Rom. 12:5)*

So, singing connects us with the activities of heaven, and unites us as a community of believers. Singing also reminds us of our identity. In life and in death, we belong to God. One of the purposes of singing is to proclaim what we believe. By singing together we are rehearsing the gospel. We are proclaiming to one another and to the world who God is and what God has done. We are also professing to one another who we are. We are weak, we are broken, and we are also forgiven. We are called, and we are grateful. We need to do this. We need to acknowledge who we are and what God has done for us. You see, it is human nature to be forgetful. If we forget that we are broken we find no need for salvation and forgiveness. If we forget that we are forgiven, we tend to wallow in our shame and retreat from the presence of God.

Sometimes we forget everything through no fault of our own. Many of us have heard the stories and seen the YouTube videos or even witnessed this ourselves. Alzheimer's patients who can't remember the names of their family members and who might not know where they are at any given moment, can still sing every word of "Amazing Grace" or "Blessed Assurance." Amidst the pain of forgetting, these songs give hope that somewhere deep inside they still know who they are and to whom they belong. I myself, will go to my grave singing,

*Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea,  
a Great High Priest whose name is Love, who ever lives and pleads for me.  
My name is graven on his hands. My name is written on his heart.  
I know that while in heaven he stands  
no tongue can bid me thence depart. No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

For me, this song is a constant reminder of the grace I've received and continue to receive in Christ. When the shame of my own disobedience become too much to bear, I need only think of the second verse:

*When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within,  
upward I look and see him there who made an end to all my sin.  
Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free;  
for God the Just is satisfied  
to look on him and pardon me, to look on him and pardon me.*

A song like this lets us hear scripture's words about judgment in a slightly different way than we typically do. Listen again to the psalmist:

*Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy  
before the LORD; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth.*

Here is another important point. We sing what we believe and we tend to believe what we sing. Our songs and our worship form us...for better or for worse. Understanding this may give you a small window into

what I, as a worship planner must sift through when choosing songs for our worship together. Sometimes this burden weighs heavy when the most popular worship song on the radio or the most nostalgic of hymns does not quite line up with the truth of the gospel or our identity as Reformed Christians.

At their best though, our songs help us express who we are and what we believe. In vocal training there is a term called the mind-body connection. This is a reference to trying to get your brain and body to work together when singing since these two things are often seemingly at odds with one another. As I entered ministry after college I began to realize the significance of song in worship as way of making the mind-heart connection. You see, for some of us our faith tends to dwell mostly in our head. Faith is about ideas and logic. For others of us faith is all in the heart. Faith is about feeling and experience. But singing brings the two together. Singing requires our whole selves. And we believe that God has saved our whole selves and so we worship with our minds, with our hearts, with our lungs, with our diaphragm, all the way down to our very feet.

**We sing  
because we believe  
and  
because we are grateful.**

Finally, and I think most importantly, we sing because we believe and because we are grateful. And what do we believe? We believe that God created the universe, that that creation is broken and marred by sin, but that God in Christ is hard at work reconciling all things and all people to himself. We believe that Christ is coming back to complete that reconciliation, and that until that time his Holy Spirit is with us, binding us to himself and to one another. You see, worship is not about appeasing an angry God, for God has already declared us sinless in Christ.

All that is left for us to do is point others to God's work and boldly proclaim our gratitude to a God who has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul writes that this is the primary motivation for singing. Listen to his words:

*"...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:15-17)*

Here is the good news about singing! God the Father is one who invites us to worship and embraces us, imperfections and all, through his Son Jesus Christ. Christ worships with us and for us, perfecting and polishing our worship into something that brings God great delight. The Holy Spirit, the very Breath of God, fills our lungs and gives us life (and there is nothing more crucial to the act of singing than the breath!). What better way to use the very Breath of Life that we've been given than to respond to God's grace by singing with joy and gratitude?

You see, regardless of how good a singer we are, none of us are really all that good at this whole worship thing. We mess up words, we sing sour notes, we miss our cues, and make countless other mistakes that only confirm our humanity and our unworthiness to be here. But we rely on Christ to perfect our worship at all times. If Jesus is truly perfecting our worship, we need not concern ourselves with whether or not we are good or bad singers. In fact, I believe that even bad singers have an important role to play in congregational singing. I once heard Marva Dawn, a prominent author on worship, tell a story about a member of her congregation who was truly an abysmal singer. He knew it. Everyone in the congregation knew it. And yet he sang his heart out every Sunday. One week, this man was on vacation and did not attend worship. You would think that the absence of this poor singer would improve congregational singing, but the opposite was true. When he returned, Marva Dawn pulled the man aside and much to his surprise, she told him that they had missed his singing the week before and that the congregation actually sings better when he is around. It turns out, this man's feeble but passionate offering to God actually inspired others around him to sing with the same passion.

*Sing to the LORD a new song;*

*Sing to the LORD, all the earth.*

*Sing to the LORD, bless his name;*

*Tell of his salvation from day to day.*

Our worship always falls short of what God requires or deserves. But because of Jesus, God takes great delight in our singing. We are God's children. God delights in our offerings much like a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or family friend takes great delight in the chaotic crayon scribbles of a toddler and proudly displays the work on the refrigerator for all to see. The point of worship is not perfection. It is through our worship that God is making us perfect (though none of us will ever really get there in this lifetime). The point of worship is to give glory to God in response to all God has done and is doing. The point of worship is to practice what we believe. We believe that the God who created us is also redeeming us. We believe that our participation in worship is also participation in that redemption. Redemption that is so much bigger than just ourselves, but includes all people and all of creation. We sing because our participation in worship gives us the opportunity to practice our priestly calling to present God to the world and present the world to God. Our participation in worship is a missional act. This is where we learn what it means and how it looks to be a disciple. This is where we learn to look for God's action. This is where we learn to respond.

**The point of worship is to give glory to God in response to all God has done and is doing.**

People of God, this is our calling. We are called to respond to God who is active in the world right here and right now. We are called to sing.

Never stop singing. Sing with your voices when we gather for worship each week so that you might sing with your very lives as you leave this place to participate in God's mission in the world that he loves and has embraced in Jesus Christ. Sing with lives that sound with the melody that is the gospel, supported by the harmonies of gratitude and service.

# God Gathers Us

## **God gathers.**

- The holy and triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) initiates, enables, and perfects our worship.
- God calls all creation<sup>iii</sup> and all people to encounter God and to worship in spirit and in truth.<sup>iv</sup>

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...with praise and thanksgiving.<sup>v</sup>
- ⇒ ...by declaring God's holiness, recognizing our brokenness, and giving thanks for God's grace.
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## **Worship is a Verb: God *Gathers Us***

Psalm 95 & Hebrews 10:19-25

January 11, 2015

Brian R. Keepers

### **Introduction – Why do we gather for worship?**

Let me begin with a question: *What brought you to church today? Why are you here?* I don't mean that to sound unwelcoming in any way—I'm so glad you are here! But I'm curious...why did you get up on a Sunday morning (when you could be sleeping in), get yourself all ready (and maybe your family ready), and brave the blustery cold and snow-covered roads to come to an hour worship service?

Perhaps you're asking yourself the same question! It's a good question to ask not just on a frigid Sunday in January but *any* Sunday. Maybe you woke up today eager to come to worship, excited to see your friends and give thanks to God. Maybe you came reluctantly out of obligation. Maybe you are honestly not sure *why* you are here, perhaps it's your first time coming to church ever (or in a long time) and you nearly turned around several times on the way here.

We all have different reasons for why we decided to come to church today. And for most of us, the motives are varied from Sunday to Sunday. But beneath all of our reasons, here is the truth: *you are here today because God called you here. We are here because God has gathered us, summoned us to come into his presence!* "O come, let us sing to the LORD!" exclaims Psalm 95. "Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving!"

Last Sunday we began a new sermon series titled, "Worship is a Verb: Getting into the Act." Jordan Clegg, our Minister of Worship and Arts, preached for the first time and hit a home run. Jordan reminded us last Sunday that a verb is "an action or relationship between two things." So when we say that worship is a verb, what we mean is that worship is not something you "go to" but it is *an action*. And here's one of the most important things we'll keep saying throughout this entire sermon series: Worship is first and foremost about *God's action! God acts and we respond*. So we get in on the act, but we are always responding to God's action, the one who draws us to himself, empowers our worship, transforms us into Christ's image, and sends us into the world to join God's mission.

Over the next several weeks, we want explore more deeply *why* we worship, *how* we worship, and *what happens* in the act of worship. Specifically, we want to do some teaching on the movements and

components of our worship service so that you can have a deeper understanding of why we do what we do and how you might participate more fully.

So today we're going to explore together this first movement of our worship service that we call "the Gathering" (or as printed in the bulletin: "We Gather to Worship the Living God"). In your bulletin, you'll see blue boxes that explain each of the different liturgical parts of this first movement of being gathered for worship. We're going to let Psalm 95 and especially Hebrews 10:19-24 guide us into a deeper understanding of these movements.

You'll notice that right after the *Prelude*, the first thing that happens in our worship service is "the call to worship." As I've already said, this points to the reality that it is *the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit)* who gathers us to worship him. We are responding to this call. Sometimes we do a call to worship with a song, like we did today; other times with a scripture passage or words like these: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." In all cases, we are acknowledging that it is God who has taken the initiative and draws us into his presence.

## **Part 2: How do we gather for worship?**

But this raises the next important question: *How* can we come into the presence of the Almighty God of the Universe? How can we possibly approach God, draw near to him? As we approach God, we encounter God's majesty and holiness. And this is too much for us! It would be like getting too close to the sun—its power would consume us. I always think of these scintillating words by Annie Dillard:

**For the sleeping god  
may wake someday and  
take offense, or the  
waking god may draw us  
out to where we can  
never return.**

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea 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. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

The prophet Isaiah did. When he was lifted up into the heavenly throne room, he was overwhelmed by God's holiness and his own sense of unworthiness: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips" he cried out! "Yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!" (Is. 6:5). It's not just that God's holiness is too great for us, but we are a people, like Isaiah, who are separated from God because of our sin. Every single one of us falls short of God's glory. We, too, are people of unclean lips and unclean hearts. We cannot enter into God's presence! This is an enormous problem. So *how* are we to draw near to the God who calls us?

Listen again to the good news that Hebrews 10:19-25 tells us: **Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, the new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart and in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.**

How do we draw near to the holy God who calls us? *Because God has first drawn near to us in a great high priest, Jesus Christ, who is our mediator and makes it possible for us to enter into the sanctuary of God's presence.*

When I was in seventh grade, I was part of a group of students that competed in a national contest to

name the next space shuttle. We ended up winning the state completion in Iowa, and our project would then go on to compete nationally. Because we won the state contest, Governor Terry Brandstad (who is now serving again as the governor) invited us to come to the capitol in Des Moines to meet him.

You can imagine how excited we were about this! The Governor, in our adolescent minds, the most important and powerful person in our state, personally invited *us* to come meet *him*! We made the four hour trip from northwest Iowa, but when we got to the state capital building, there were all kinds of check points that we weren't allowed access into. And we certainly weren't allowed access, on our own, to just traipse into the Governor's private office! The Governor's chief of staff met us in the lobby of the capital building. This was the Governor's right hand man, the one had authorization to get us through all the check points and usher us into the Governor's office.

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relationship with God.

Jesus is the great priest, the mediator, God the Father's "right hand man" so to speak, who has authorization to take us to the place we cannot go on our own. He is the one who ushers us into the throne room of the Father, brings us into God's presence, forgives us of our sin, and restores us to a right relationship with God.

Hebrews 10:19-25 is actually just a small part of a larger sermon, and it is explaining how Jesus is now the fulfillment of the OT sacrificial system. We don't have the time and space to get into it in depth this morning, but let me just highlight the main parts.

The high priest was one who was specially appointed by God to represent God's people in the Old Testament. They were a mediator, a go-between, who alone were allowed entrance into the "Holy of Holies" in the tabernacle or temple. The "Holy of Holies" was the most sacred place in the tabernacle where God's presence was believed to dwell in a special way. The worshippers were not allowed access into this place—only the high priest. A curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tent, keeping the people out. The high priest would then offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people—usually by sacrificing a goat or lamb as its blood, which represented life, was shed on their behalf for their sins.

Do you see what the preacher of Hebrews is saying here? Jesus is that great high priest once and for all. Whereas the high priests of old had to offer ongoing sacrifices for the people, Jesus, in his own selfless death on the cross, has offered a sacrifice once and for all! And what this means is that the curtain has been torn (this is what happened in the temple when Jesus died on the cross) and we are now allowed access into the most holy place of God's presence! In other words, Jesus is the mediator who brings us into right relationship with God, washing our hearts and lips clean. In him, we have forgiveness and become sons and daughters of God, marked by the waters of baptism! And we can now enter God's presence with confidence and with true hearts in full assurance of faith—in full assurance that God has accepted us, loves us, and that we belong to him!

This is why, in our liturgy, we have a time of *confession* each Sunday. Even though we now belong to Jesus and are made sons and daughters of God, it doesn't mean that we are "perfect." We still sin—by things we do and things we leave undone; by not just our actions and words but the attitude of our hearts. We are still growing up into our baptismal identity, being made holy as God is holy. This is what growing as a disciple is all about.

So to confess our sins is to acknowledge how much we need God's grace and mercy in Jesus. We don't do this to beat ourselves up or wallow in shame. Nor do we do this to *get* God to forgive us. Remember the good news of Hebrews: God has *already* forgiven us in Jesus. We confess our sins as a way of receiving that forgiveness and being reminded that we belong to Christ! Confession becomes the path Jesus leads us on into

deeper intimacy with God in his throne room.

That's why we always follow up the time of confession with an "assurance of pardon." This is when we hear aloud, together the truth of the good news that God has indeed forgiven us in Christ; that Jesus is our mediator, even now, and brings us into relationship with God. We need to hear this! There is something about speaking it out loud, singing it together, that helps it sink more deeply into our minds and hearts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that his students in his underground seminary confess their sins together and speak an assurance of pardon. "In Christ, you are forgiven" they'd say as they looked each other in the eyes. Why? Because Bonhoeffer knew that there was something about hearing this spoken to us that help us hear it better, helps it to really sink in.

So let's pause here and review all the ground we've covered so far. We worship because God calls us into his presence. He initiates, we respond. How do we enter his presence? Because of Jesus, our mediator, the new and living way, who makes it possible for us to be forgiven and draw near to God.

### ***Part 3: For what purpose does God gather us?***

But here's the thing. Jesus not only makes it possible for us to draw near and be reconciled to God; he also makes it possible for us to draw near and be reconciled to *each other*. God gathers us to worship him, yes. And God gathers us *together* to be his community, his people. "For he is our God!" exclaims Psalm 95, "and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand."

In Jesus, the mediator and great high priest, God makes us into single family where anything and everything that would otherwise divide us comes crumbling down. As God embraces us, now we are called to embrace one another, to build one another up in love. This is exactly the point the preacher of Hebrews wants to make when he says this: "Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as we see the Day approaching."

God gathers us for himself; and God gathers us for each other. Worship is always personal, but it is never a private, individualistic act. Even when we're worshipping God while singing in the car on the way to work or doing our morning devotions or going for a walk in nature...*even then* our worship is connected to the larger worship of all God's people throughout history and all of creation. This is why it's so important for us to come together in community to worship. It is a *visible reminder* that we are part of God's family. That God never intended us to do life and discipleship alone.

**It is a visible reminder that we are part of God's family. That God never intended us to do life and discipleship alone.**

John MacArthur tells the story of a pastor who visited a parishioner who had stopped coming to Sunday worship. It was a chilly evening, and the pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. The parishioner welcomed him in, and they both sat in silence, watching the flames crackle and sputter from the burning logs. After a while, the pastor took the fire tongs, picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it on one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The glow of the one lone ember quickly diminished, and then its fire was no more. Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and places it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately, it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the pastor reached the door to leave, the parishioner said, "Thank you for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday."

We need community to stir the embers of our faith and spur us on to live as disciples of Jesus in all of life. God gathers us for himself and for each other! This is why we always take the time in this "Gathering" part

of our worship service to pass the peace of Christ. Beyond just greeting each other, *we are affirming that Jesus binds us together in the Spirit and makes us a community, that we need the faith of each other to keep the embers of our own faith warm and burning.* It is also an opportunity for us to *be reconciled to each other* if there is anything that is getting in the way of our relationships. To do what Jesus instructs us in the Sermon on the Mount: “If your brother or sister has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled to them.” In other words, an essential part of worship that glorifies God is when we seek forgiveness and offer it to one another. In fact, refusing to do so hinders our worship and keeps it from being pleasing to God.

One of the other things we do in our worship service, connected to the passing of the peace, is to take time to share about news that has to do with our life and ministry together. The announcements are not some kind of disruption to our worship or infomercial but a way of us acknowledging that God has gathered us to be his people together—to do life, ministry and mission as *one body*.

#### ***Part 4: Gathered to be Scattered—Offering our Lives as Worship***

God calls us together, draws us into his presence through Christ by the Spirit, binds us together as a community. All of this happens in worship. There is one last thing I want to highlight this morning around this whole “Gathering” movement of our worship. Remember how we’ve said that worship, at its heart, is about God’s action and our response? Well, that kind of dance is happening all throughout. But there is a key point in this Gathered section of our worship service where our response is made most explicit: *the offering*.

We heard Jordan preach on Psalm 96 last Sunday, which instructs: “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts!” (96:8). Let’s just be clear: giving an offering is not something we do as the price for admission in worship, nor is it something we do to earn God’s favor—we’ve already seen that God accepts us because of Jesus. We give an offering as *an act of worship*—in response to God’s mercy and grace and as a way of saying “thank you, God!” and “We love you, Lord!”

But let’s take this even further. We give our financial gifts as “symbols of our lives”—offering our whole selves—all we have, all we are—to God in gratitude for who God is and what God has done for us. *You see, worship is not just about what happens for an hour on Sunday; it is a way of life!* As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:1: “Offer your bodies (your whole life) as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship!” So this last part of our Gathering section orients us towards *a whole life of worship*—glorifying God and joining him in mission in our ordinary, everyday lives. We are gathered to be scattered—to join his mission by being “living sacrifices” Monday through Saturday.

So let hear once more God’s call to worship today! *O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. ... And let us consider how to provoke one another with toward 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!*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen!

# God Speaks to Us

## **God speaks.**

- God gathers us to worship in order that we might hear from God, remember God's Story, and be further transformed into the likeness of Christ.<sup>viii</sup>
- Hearing from God through scripture and spoken word is a central act of our worship.

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by giving thanks for God's work of salvation both now and throughout history.
- ⇒ ...by choosing through the power of the Spirit, to participate in God's Story by living lives that are being transformed into the likeness of Christ

## Worship is a Verb: God *Speaks* to Us

Nehemiah 8  
January 18, 2014  
Brian R. Keepers

The late Robert Webber, who had spent his whole life studying worship, was once asked, "In a sentence, how would you describe worship?" He thought about it for a moment and then answered, "Worship does God's Story."

Think about that. *Worship does God's Story.*

When God gathers us to worship, he is drawing us into his larger Story, revealed in the Bible. As we've been saying throughout this series, "Worship is a Verb," worship is first and foremost about God's action. And we respond. We get in on the act! In the Spirit's power, we play our part by enacting or rehearsing God's Story together in worship. And as we do this, not only is God glorified but we get shaped as disciples of Jesus, formed into the very character of Christ.

While all of worship draws us into God's Story, the place in our worship where this is most explicit is the second key movement of our liturgy, where we encounter God through the Word and sacrament. We'll talk about the sacraments (the Lord's Supper and Baptism) for the next couple weeks, but today I want to talk about preaching. It is in the reading of Scripture and preaching God's word that *God speaks to us*.

Through ordinary preachers, God reveals himself, his character and purposes in the world. Through ordinary preachers, God tells us our Story and reminds us who we are and whose we are. God speaks in order to "snatch us up" into God's Story where our lives get re-plotted in Christ by the Spirit and we are transformed for the sake of God's mission in the world.

Listen to this story from the Bible, then, about an ordinary preacher who God used to speak to his people, the Israelites, after they returned from Babylonian exile. It's found in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Before we hear it, here's some background. After spending 128 years in Babylonian captivity, God brings his people home to Jerusalem. The temple is destroyed; the entire city lies in ruins. It would all need to be rebuilt from ground zero.

So God raises up a leader named Nehemiah and sends him to Jerusalem to coordinate the rebuilding of the great wall around the city. God is not only concerned about the rebuilding of the holy city, however. Even more so, God is concerned about the rebuilding of his *holy people*. Exile is not just a matter of being displaced geographically. Exile is also forgetting your story, which is to forget who you are and whose you are.

So if God's people are truly to "come home," just being in Jerusalem won't do it. They need to remember their story—who they are as God's people. And so God sends along with Nehemiah an old scribe, an old faithful preacher named Ezra, whose job it was to tell the people their story again. (*Nehemiah 8*)

Through ordinary preachers who faithfully preach the Scriptures, *God speaks*. There was nothing special about Ezra, except that he made himself available to God. This story isn't really about Ezra. Like the rest of the Bible—it's about God. God is the main actor, God is the one who is moving among his people. Ezra is just a witness, a servant, an instrument.

As we enter this story together, I want us to take notice of how the people are responding to God's action. If God gathers us and wants to speak to us through his Word, then what might we learn about how to listen to a sermon? I think there are a handful of clues here that are worth pointing out.

**First, did you notice that the people had an eagerness, a hunger, to hear God's Word?** Now this hadn't always been true. In fact, Ezra had been putting on Bible studies and offering worship services for 14 years, and nobody showed up. But now the wind of the Spirit rushes through this city under construction—the same Spirit that brooded over the waters of creation. It stirs up a growing hunger for God's Word. As a result of this stirring (notice that it was the people who initiated this whole assembly—not Ezra!) Prompted by the Spirit, they crammed into the square before the Water Gate and they went and got Ezra and told him to bring out the Law of Moses. They built the high wooden platform for Ezra, with this purpose in mind.

This past week I co-taught a preaching J-term at Western Seminary with a good friend of mine. On the last day of class, we invited a panel of folks from our congregations to come and talk to the students about what they look for in a sermon. I was so struck by how, both of the panelists from Fellowship, said that one of the most important things they've learned is to come to worship with a sense of expectation that God is going to speak to them.

Have you come into the sanctuary with an expectation and eagerness that God wants to speak to you personally—where you are in your life right now—and speak to us together as a community? Do we have a hunger for God's Word? Do we recognize, like Jesus in the wilderness, that we can't live on bread alone but we are utterly dependent on God's Word for true life? Let us ask God, then, to stir within us a growing hunger for his Word, a holy expectation that he really will speak to us through the preaching of the Scriptures.

**Here's another thing we notice. We're told that "the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law."** In other words, as they gathered together, they assumed a posture of active listening! Their ears were open. Again, this was possible because of the Holy Spirit. Still, they respond by being attentive. When Ezra opens the book, they all jump to their feet! They lean in and are listening with all ears because they really believe that God is going to speak! Not only that, but they realized that through the reading of God's Holy Word, God himself was somehow present in their midst! God had come to meet with them! And so they lift their hands and shouted "Amen!" and fell to their faces in worship!

This is a really important point. When God speaks through his Word, he is also present with us. He's not just phoning it in from heaven but comes to be with us, in our midst! Martin Luther said it in such a memorable way: the Scriptures are like vast doors swinging open on their hinges so that the living Christ might enter into the sanctuary of his people.

You've probably noticed that before any of us pastors preach, the first thing we do when we stand up is say to you, "The Lord be with you!" And you reply: "And also with you." Someone new to our church said to me recently, I've figured out why you all say that (they've heard us say it outside of worship, in other meetings too). It's your way of getting people's attention! Like a teacher who claps her hands to get the kids to quiet down and focus!" Well, I suppose that's partly right. We do say it as a way of calling attention, but all of the attention is on God and what God wants to do in the preaching moment. It's our way of also emphasizing that the sermon is not a

passive event but it involves all of us playing our part! All of us giving our attention to God.

The truth is, listening faithfully to a sermon takes work! While it is the Holy Spirit who opens our ears, listening to a sermon, like all of worship, requires active participation. I have a job to do as a preacher, and you have an equally important job to do as an active listener. Preaching is not just about one person who gets up to deliver a sermon—it is a *communal* event!

A sermon can grow strong in the presence of people who attend carefully to it, leaning forward in their pews and opening their faces to a preacher from whom they clearly expect to receive good news.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes it this way: “[The sermon is] not the creation of one person but the creation of a body of people for whom and to whom one of them speaks. A congregation can make or break a sermon by the quality of their response to it. An inspired sermon can wind up skewered somewhere near the second pew by a congregation of people who sit with their arms crossed and their eyes narrowed, coughing and scuffing their feet as the preacher struggles to be heard. Similarly, a sermon can grow strong in the presence of people who attend carefully to it, leaning forward in their pews and opening their faces to a preacher from whom they clearly expect to receive good news.” (*The Preaching Life*, p.77)

So the Israelites had a hunger for God’s Word. They listened with full attention. What happened next in the story? The Levites went throughout the crowd **making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.** In other words, **the people humbly submitted to God’s Word and received it in their hearts.** The goal of listening faithfully to a sermon is not just to get information about God or the culture of the Bible or some interesting insight (as helpful as that may be). Ultimately, God desires to *transform us through his Word*. And this can only happen if we humbly submit to God’s Word. To “understand” goes beyond an intellectual grasp of God’s Word; it is to “stand under” God’s word, to yield to it in our own lives. To “stand under” God’s Word is to let the Holy Spirit draw us into God’s Story in the Scriptures, and this story tells us who we are, to whom we belong, and shapes us to live as disciples of Jesus.

One of the most beautiful examples in the Bible of someone who truly understood or “stood under” God’s Word is Mary. We heard her story during Advent in Luke’s Gospel. Do you remember what she said when the angel Gabriel came to her and announced that she would carry the Savior of the world in her womb? “Here I am, your servant. Let it be with me according to your word.”

To receive God’s Word with this kind of humility will not always be pleasant or comfortable. In fact, God’s word often confronts and convicts. Hebrews 4:12 reminds us that “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edge sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The audience to whom Peter preached his first Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 experienced this as, through his preaching, they were cut to the heart. They were convicted to repent, to change their ways. So there will be times when a faithful sermon will bring more discomfort than comfort, it will cut before it can heal. Martin Luther once observed, “If we hear the Word of God, and it doesn’t offend us, then we have not heard it.”

The Israelites let God’s Word convict and offend them. As they faced the reality of their sin, they mourned and wept aloud—a gesture of repentance. And I love how Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites respond to their weeping. They tell them not to weep but to rejoice! Why? Because when we truly receive God’s Word, not only do we come face to face with the reality of our sinful condition but we also receive the words of God’s grace. Even though we were exiles, God delivers us and brings us home. Grace turns our mourning into joyful dancing.

Nehemiah instructs the people: **Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who having nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is our**

**strength.** And the writer of Nehemiah tells us that **all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now had understood the words that had been made known to them.**

The people come to Ezra with a hunger for God's Word. They listen attentively to God's Word, expecting God to speak and ready to encounter God. They understand what they hear and submit to it personally and as a community.

**Lastly, they obeyed God's Word.** They put it into practice in their daily lives. They realigned their behaviours and their ways of doing things, letting God's Word direct their ways. They didn't simply chalk this event up as a moving, "mountain top" spiritual experience and then, when the feelings wore off, go on with their lives as usual. No, they made significant life-style changes. In fact, the remaining chapters of Nehemiah are all about how the people renewed their covenant with God. Hearing God's Word and submitting to it led them to respond in holy obedience—they recommitted their lives to living for God and walking with God.

"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves," writes James in 1:22-25. "For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in the mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they look like. But those who look in the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."

Taking his cue from James, John Calvin once wrote: "All right knowledge of God is born of obedience." The Bible is not just to be heard and studied and assimilated into our bones—it is to be lived! Acted out!

This is the power of God's Word. It brings hope where there is despair, healing where there is brokenness, passion where there is apathy, joy where there is sorrow, life where there is death. Exiled people who have forgotten who they are get delivered and brought home and rediscover the true source of joy and strength by the power of God's Word.

Yes, God gathers us together so that, through ordinary preachers, he might speak to us. Comfort us. Convict us. Encourage us. Transform us. Draw us into his Story where we find ourselves and our purpose in this world.

God does this for more than just us. We said last week that God gathers us in order to scatter us—into all the places he sends us, among all the people he surrounds us, in all the situations he places us—to be his witnesses. Worship is a dress-rehearsal for our lives Monday through Saturday.

What are we rehearsing in listening to God's Word preached? We are learning how to lean in and listen to God in all the moments of the week, as well as how to listen well to others. And we are learning how to be preachers ourselves. Did you catch that? I just called you a preacher, too!

I love these words by 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher P.T. Forsyth: "The one great preacher in history...is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach....He is to preach to the church from the gospel so that with the church he may preach the gospel to the world."

I'm coming to see my role more and more as a preacher who equips you—and us together—to go into the world and be preachers. Not necessarily preachers like I've just done this morning, where you get up and deliver a sermon in worship. But God takes your ordinary life, your ordinary voice, and he makes it into his mouthpiece as well. *You* are his instrument, sent to bear witness through your actions, yes, but also your words. A word of kindness spoken to a waitress. A word of encouragement spoken to a child. A word of hope spoken to a co-worker. A word of truth spoken to a friend. A word of forgiveness spoken to an enemy.

*God speaks to us through his Word in order to speak through us to the world.*

If this feels daunting—that God wants to speak through you—you are in good company! Most of the people God called in the Bible to be his instruments, agents of his

**God speaks to us through  
his Word in order to speak  
through us to the world.**

Word, felt inadequate and unqualified for the task. But hear these words that God spoke to Moses, and may they give you courage as you preach to the world: "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." (Ex. 4:11-12)

*So let us go, all you preachers, in the name of Jesus and the power of his Spirit. And remember: God will be with your mouth and give you the words to speak, just when you need them!*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

# God Feeds Us

## **God feeds.**

- In the sacraments (baptism and communion), God causes us to remember the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.
- God calls us to commune with Christ who remains with us always.
- God gives us hope by offering a foretaste of the kingdom of God on earth.
- God adopts, cleanses, and nourishes us for participation in God's mission in the world.

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by seeking spiritual nourishment in the sacraments. <sup>ix</sup>
- ⇒ ...by giving thanks for God's transformational work of redemption, renewal, and resurrection.
- ⇒ ...by presenting our world to God in prayer and offering our lives as living sacrifices for the sake of the world.

## Worship is a Verb: God *Feeds* Us

Luke 24:13-35  
January 25, 2015  
Brian R. Keepers

It's the first Easter, later in the day. Two disciples are walking, quietly engaged in conversation as they go. We're not given a lot of details. One of them is named Cleopas; the other is unnamed but is likely Cleopas' wife. They are on their way to the small village of Emmaus, returning home from Jerusalem after the Sabbath.

As they make this journey home, there is no bounce in their step, no joyful urgency in their stride. Sadness hangs over them like a dark rain cloud. As they walk along, they talk just above a whisper about broken dreams and dashed hopes. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah who would redeem Israel. But as everybody knows, only failed messiahs suffer and die.

And then, out of nowhere, Jesus shows up and walks alongside them. Only they don't know it's Jesus. They don't recognize him in his risen, glorified body. They presume he is a stranger who is out of touch with the horrible things that have taken place in Jerusalem.

When they tell this stranger all that has happened—the way Jesus was betrayed and crucified, and then how the women discovered the tomb empty early that morning but nobody had found the body yet, Jesus says to them: "Oh how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all the prophets have declared! Don't you see that things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter his glory?" And then, Luke tells us, Jesus starts in the beginning with the book of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament) and goes through all the prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him.

When they arrive in Emmaus, the two disciples invite the stranger to stay with them (they still haven't caught on that this is Jesus!) and share a meal. And it's when they sit down together at the table that the stranger does the most surprising thing. The guest suddenly becomes the host! Jesus picks up bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. Sound familiar? Where have we heard those words before?

It's in these very significant acts that the two disciples suddenly realize that the one seated at their table is not a stranger but the risen Lord! "Then their eyes were opened," says Luke, "and they recognized

him.”

*Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.* Their eyes were opened to the reality that they had found Jesus—or more accurately, Jesus had found them! And then we’re told Jesus vanishes without a trace. But the two disciples, their long faces now replaced with wide-eyed wonder and their heavy hearts now quickened with joy, go running back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples the good news: “It’s true! The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to us! He has made himself known in the breaking of the bread!”

It’s a wonderful story, isn’t it? Luke is such a good storyteller anyway, but this has to be one of his best. But here’s the thing: it’s not *just* a story. Emmaus is not just some geographical place nor is this story just some historical event that happened once in the distant past like the Battle of Gettysburg. *Emmaus keeps happening!* The risen, living Jesus continues to appear to us, make himself known, cause our hearts to burn and open our eyes to his presence. And in opening our eyes to his presence, he gives us a new way of seeing all of life.

How does Emmaus keep happening? How does Jesus make himself known to us? It’s so clear in Luke’s story, isn’t it? Through the Scriptures, yes. And also through the breaking of bread, through holy communion.

Emmaus is not just some geographical place nor is this story just some historical event that happened once in the distant past like the Battle of Gettysburg. *Emmaus keeps happening!*

Today we reach the midpoint of our sermon series on worship. We’ve been exploring over the past few weeks how worship is a verb—not a “thing” we go to but an action that we are drawn into. Worship is primarily about God’s action, and we get into the act by responding. “Worship does God’s Story,” said Robert Webber. Our worship liturgy is our script. And as we speak our lines and play our part, we find ourselves enacting together God’s Story where we get transformed more and more into the image of Christ.

The first movement of our script has to do with *the Gathering*. God gathers us into his presence through Jesus, the Mediator, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Why does God gather us? We talked last Sunday about how God gathers us to speak to us—to speak to us through the reading of the Bible and the preaching of God’s Word. We encounter Jesus, the living Word, through the ministry of preaching the Scriptures.

As we heard in Luke’s gospel a moment ago, God also gathers us to *feed* us. God is made known through his written and spoken Word *and* through the sacraments. The two go hand in hand. In the words of a friend of mine, it’s like *fish-n-chips*! Or like *chips-n-salsa*! You really can’t have one without the other! God reveals himself, encounters us, draws us into His Story, through *Word-n-sacrament*.

We affirm two sacraments in the Protestant tradition: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Other faith traditions, like the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition, have more (seven, in fact). What exactly is a sacrament?

The Heidelberg Catechism defines a sacrament this way: **Sacraments are holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel and might put his seal on that promise. And this is God’s promise: to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross. (#66).**

Sacraments are “signs” and “seals.” Think about that. A “sign” is something that points to something else. Like the sign that reads “Holland” on the edge of town. The sign itself is not Holland, but it tells you that you are entering the city limits. And a “seal” confirms that something is authentic. A seal was used in ancient

days by a king to mark a royal letter—it told you that the letter was authentic and had authority.

The sacraments—the water of baptism and the bread and cup of holy communion—are ordinary things that point to the reality of God’s love in Christ and confirm to us in a tangible way—a way we can see, touch, smell, taste—that God’s promises are true.

Every day I walk my youngest daughter Abby down to the bus stop (Emma goes earlier since she’s in middle school). We have a routine. She stands in line with the other kids, and then when the bus comes, I say to her, “Have a great day at school, Abby! I love you!” And she’ll point to her cheek, “Dad, kiss!” And I’ll give her a kiss before she goes ambling onto the bus. It’s not that my words to Abby don’t matter. They do! But Abby needs some kind of tangible act—a kiss—to go with those words, to confirm them.

This happens all the time for us. When we make a promise, there is often an action that goes with it. A handshake. Signing a contract. Giving a wedding ring. Placing a hand on the Bible. This is what God is doing for us in the sacraments. His Word is powerful and effective and we can count on it; but he knows that we need something tangible to reassure us and confirm that his promises are true. So he gives us the water of baptism; the bread and the cup of the Lord’s Supper.

**God gives us the sacraments as a kind and gracious gift to prop up our faith, sustain it, feed and nourish it, and give us strength for the journey of discipleship.**

“Our faith is slight and feeble,” said John Calvin, “unless it be propped up on all sides and sustained by every means; it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way.” God gives us the sacraments as a kind and gracious gift to prop up our faith, sustain it, feed and nourish it, and give us strength for the journey of discipleship.

We’ll talk about baptism next Sunday. Today, we want to focus on the Lord’s Supper. Again, back to our story in Luke, it is in the breaking of bread that the disciples recognize Jesus—their eyes are opened!

So what is happening when we come to the Lord’s Table? There are three words that you hear us say every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. In fact, they are etched into our communion table: remembrance, communion and hope. Pay special attention today when we do the communion liturgy and talk about each of these words. I’m not going to get into them in this sermon (come to Jordan’s class if you want to delve into them more deeply!), but I want to emphasize this point which is at the heart of Luke’s story of the Emmaus Road: *when we celebrate this meal, something holy and mysterious happens by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

We don’t just remember what Jesus has done; *Jesus is really spiritually present with us and he feeds us, nourishes our faith just like food nourishes us physically.* At the Table, Emmaus keeps happening! Our eyes are opened to Christ’s presence with us and our faith is strengthened for the journey of discipleship.

We have union with Jesus, and to borrow once more from John Calvin, his very life is poured into ours! Shall we dare to wade even deeper into this glorious mystery? In this bread and cup, Jesus not only descends to us but he lifts us up into the throne room of the Father in heaven! As those joined to Jesus, we are ushered into the very presence of the Father, drawn into the very life of the triune God! And we are joined to all believers throughout time! Try to wrap your mind around that!

If you feel like all of this is over your head, you’re in a good company. Calvin himself acknowledged that the Lord’s Supper is something that is to be experienced more than fully understood. We are simply called to come hungry and thirsty, to come in faith, to come ready to receive and be fed by a God who loves us and wants to transform us to reflect his image.

Calvin so believed that God feeds and nourishes our faith through the Lord's Supper that he advocated for a weekly celebration of communion. This was the practice of the early church, Acts 2 tells us, as every time they gathered, they broke bread together. Why would we not want to take advantage as often as possible of this means of grace? What makes communion special, then, is not that we only celebrate it once in a while but that Jesus is present to us in a special way every time we gather at the Table, whether we are aware of it or not!

The person who taught me the most about how God mysteriously feeds us in the Lord's Supper is actually not Martin Luther or John Calvin or any seminary professor. It was Blondie Granstra. Blondie was an elderly woman in the first church I served. A plump, vivacious woman with a larger than life personality. She was diagnosed with an incurable lung disease in her early seventies (fibrosis of the lungs), which forced her to be homebound and hooked up to a mobile oxygen machine.

I would call on Blondie and serve her home communion as often as I could. When I'd arrive at her house, she'd greet me at the door with a smile and smother me with a big hug, then lead me by the hand to her little kitchen table where she had it all cleared off. She'd plop down in her chair and press her hands on the table, all ready to go.

You have to imagine this now. Blondie, sitting there at her kitchen table with the eagerness of a child, waiting for her young pastor to fumble open his little black traveling communion box and get everything set up. As I read through the liturgy, tripping over my words, she's starting to rock back and forth ever so slightly in her chair, cheering me on with a kind of Pentecostal fervor, "Yes, Jesus!" "That's right, honey!" "Thank you, Lord!" and "Help him, Jesus!"

When I'd finally get to the words of institution, Blondie was so revved up and ready to feast that I thought for sure she would pounce over the table and tackle me! When I offer her the body and blood of Jesus, she takes it and savors it, every last taste, like her life depended on this bread and juice, which it did. Or more accurately, her life depended on *Jesus*, the true bread of life. *Jesus*, the true vine apart from whom we have no life.

And when I look across the table at this beautiful woman of God, tubes in her nose, eyes moist with tears and a big grin on her face, I understand what the Heidelberg Catechism means when it says that in communion, "so surely [Christ] nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood" (#75). I understand what it means when it says, "Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body." (#76). I understand what it means that the risen Christ is alive and present in the ordinary bread and juice. That Emmaus keeps happening. That *Word-n-sacrament* go together like *fish-n-chips*. That our God is a kind, gracious God who feeds us because he so deeply loves us.

I would leave Blondie's house refreshed in my own spirit, strengthened in my own faith, much like I imagine the two disciples' running back to Jerusalem, ready to proclaim to all whom they meet, "It's true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to us!"

That, after all, is one of the main reasons God feeds us at this Table. And we must not forget it. He feeds us so that we might have the strength and the courage to follow Jesus in mission, to go into the world and declare in word and deed that "Jesus is alive!" He feeds us so that we might join God in his work to feed a world that is dying of hunger and thirst—a world that is starving for hope. He feeds us so that we, united with Jesus by the Spirit, might offer our own lives to be taken, blessed, broken and given for the glory of God and the sake

**He feeds us so that we might join God in his work to feed a world that is dying of hunger and thirst—a world that is starving for hope.**

of the world.

So come. Come, eat and drink. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good. Come and be fed by the One who is the Bread of Life and the True Vine, the One in whom you will never be hungry and never go thirsty.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

# God Claims Us

## **God claims.**

- In the sacraments (baptism and communion), God causes us to remember the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.
- God adopts, cleanses, and nourishes us for participation in God's mission in the world.

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by seeking spiritual nourishment in the sacraments.<sup>ix</sup>
- ⇒ ...by presenting our world to God in prayer and offering our lives as living sacrifices for the sake of the world.<sup>x</sup>

## Worship is a Verb: God *Claims Us*

Luke 24:13-35  
February 1, 2015  
Marijke Strong

### Introduction

She wasn't sure about getting baptized. It was November of last year (only a few months ago) and Pastor Megan and I were attending a play at the local high school on a Friday night. At intermission we ran into a family whose two children were being baptized that Sunday along with several other babies. Calla was a little older than most children when they're baptized; she was about 6 years old. When we ran into her family at intermission her mother exclaimed, "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! I'd love for Calla to meet you before Sunday. She's a little anxious about the baptism."

I walked over to where she was twirling in the corner and hunkered down to be at her eye-level. "Hi Calla, I'm Pastor Marijke and I'm going to help with your baptism on Sunday." She stopped twirling and regarded me with somber eyes. "I am nervous about being baptized," she said. "Everyone will be looking at me." We talked together about what baptism means and she seemed to grow calm.

That Sunday was truly beautiful. Several babies were baptized before Calla's family came forward. The congregation promised to love and nurture every one. Then I baptized her brother James, holding him in my arms and speaking the words of blessing over his tiny body before handing him back to his parents and lifting Calla into my arms. Now I have baptized a few babies in my time but I have to tell you, speaking the words of blessing over a little body sleeping in your arms is much different than speaking them to a child looking you straight in the eye from the distance of about five or six inches. I could see her pupils.

I found myself explaining the words as we went along:

***"Calla, it was for you that Jesus Christ came into the world.*** (That means God loves you so much that he sent Jesus for you!)" She nodded calmly and said, "Mm-hm," never taking her eyes from mine. I have to admit, it threw me off a little.

***"For you he died and for you he conquered death.*** (That means Jesus died to give you life and you don't need to be worried or afraid of death anymore.)" She shook her head wisely and smiled

encouragingly. I was starting to warm up.

***“Yes, for you!”*** I said, ***“Though you knew nothing about it when you were born!”*** (You had no idea how much God loved you then, but the truth is, you are dearly loved by the Father.) ***We love because God first loved us!*** (That means God’s love helps you love God and helps you love everybody else!).”

She broke into a radiant grin and I’m pretty sure I was grinning myself by this time. Dipping my hand into the water and making the sign of the cross on her forehead, I said: ***“Calla Faye Peterson, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”***

Then we walked out into the congregation; James was in one arm and Calla held my other hand. We walked out into the covenant community that had pledged to love, and pray for, and support those two new members. *You* promised to love and pray for and support them... to embrace them into the family of God.

## The Sacrament of Baptism

Last week we heard a wonderful sermon by Pastor Brian about the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. In it he explained that sacraments are “signs and seals” of God’s grace. A “sign” is something that points to something else. And a “seal” confirms that something is authentic, like a signet ring pressed into wax on a letter sent by a king. So, Pastor Brian said, “The sacraments... are ordinary [physical] things that point to the reality of God’s love in Christ and confirm to us in a tangible way—a way we can see, touch, smell, taste—that God’s promises are true.”

The Sacrament of Baptism is a symbol that teaches us about being embraced into God’s family. It is a sign and seal of our adoption. That’s why in the Reformed Church we use the words “Covenant Community” when we speak about baptism. We are reminding ourselves of the great covenant – the promise – God made with his people, the Israelites, when he adopted them into his family. He did it by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, bringing them through the waters of the Red Sea, and through the wilderness to the foot of Mount Sinai, where he declared them to be his “Treasured Possession” – his own beloved people. Then he gave them the Law as a way for them to agree that they belonged to God and that they would live their lives in grateful witness to his saving love. That was a covenant: an agreement between God and God’s people.

**The Sacrament of Baptism is a symbol that teaches us about being embraced into God’s family.**

The symbol of that covenant was circumcision. It was a visible, physical way for the Israelites to show their submission to God and to be marked as belonging to God – body and soul – forever. But over time they often failed to hold up their end of the agreement – to live their lives in witness to God’s love. They had a tendency to reduce the laws to legalistic actions... or not obey them at all. That should have resulted in punishment and death. But instead God planned to send One into the world who would, in his own self, totally fulfill the Law in a way the people never could, setting them free to love and worship him forever. For God so loved the world that he sent Jesus, who brought a new covenant of love and a new way for us to understand the total power of that love for all people.

The gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – all tell the story. Today we hear it from Mark, who starts at the very beginning. Chapter One, verse One:



## Covenant

**<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,**

**“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;**

**<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:**

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”**

**<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God to prepare the people for Jesus’ coming. He told them to repent of their sins not just with outward legalistic actions but inwardly, in their softened hearts. Then he baptized them in water as a symbol that they had been washed totally clean by God. This was something that was done *to them*; they could not do for themselves. 1 John 4 sums it up quite simply like this: “We love because God first loved us.” In other words, it’s only because God’s love comes first that we are even able to love.

Baptism is a sign and seal showing us that Worship truly is a Verb. It is God’s action first. While we were entirely helpless – like babies – God reached out in love and rescued us, bringing us into his family: the covenant community of God.

The way God chose to do this was through the person of Jesus Christ, who came down into our brokenness, our humanity, our dirtiness, our sin. Jesus; who “moved into the neighborhood,” who immersed himself and got totally wet in the human condition. Nowhere do we see this more clearly pictured than in his baptism.

## Participation

**<sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.**

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I feel like these stories leave out a few details. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” What happened? What was it like? When did John recognize Jesus? Was he part of the crowd? Did he squelch through the mud of the riverbank in his bare feet? Did he wade right down into the water? What did they say to each other? In Matthew’s account, when Jesus came to be baptized we hear that John didn’t want to do it. He seemed almost horrified by the idea: “I need to be baptized by *you*,” he said, “and do you come to *me*?!“ But Jesus told him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” And John baptized him right then and there. (Mat 3:13-15)

It’s significant that John didn’t want to baptize Jesus at first, because it shows that he knew what was happening: in that moment the One who had created the entire world was humbling himself – he was coming down to participate in our humanity. He was hunkering down to be at our eye-level. And why? So that we could also participate with him when he stood back up. He was uniting himself with us in our humanity so that we would be united to him when he died to sin and rose to new life. That’s what the waters of baptism

He was uniting himself with us in our humanity so that we would be united to him when he died to sin and rose to new life. That's what the waters of baptism show us so tangibly: with Christ we go down into death *so that* with Christ we can rise back up to new life.

show us so tangibly: with Christ we go down into death *so that* with Christ we can rise back up to new life. Romans 6 sums it up this way:

<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life....

<sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This is exactly what John Calvin meant (we heard it last week) when he said that through union with Christ, his very life is poured into ours. Pastor Brian asked us, "Shall we dare to wade even deeper into this glorious mystery?" Today we're asking: shall we jump off the diving board into the deep end? It is as true for Baptism as it is for the Lord's Supper: in the sacrament, "Jesus not only descends to us but he lifts us up into the throne room of the

Father in heaven! As those joined to Jesus, we are ushered into the very presence of the Father, drawn into the very life of the triune God!" And this is where we are made right with God forever!

The sacrament of baptism is a sign and seal that Christ participated with us in our sinful humanity so that we might participate with him in his resurrection to new life. That has powerful implications for our understanding of who we are and how we are to live from now on. Listen to this:

## Identity

**<sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."**

We just heard that if we are identified with Christ in his death, then we are also identified with him in his life. Well, that life includes his identity as the Beloved of God! When Christ drew us into his life, "*we became his brothers and sisters so that the Father's voice at Jesus' baptism also speaks to us.*"<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear it? The Father's voice at Jesus' baptism is also speaking to you. He says, "You are my beloved child. You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. It doesn't matter what you've done. I am claiming you as my own and bringing you into my family. With you I am well pleased. Because I choose to be." *I love you. I'm pleased with you.*

What does that mean for your understanding of who you are and how you are to live from now on? In the baptism liturgy we often quote 1 John 3: "What great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God; *and that is what we are.*" I want you to hear this, because it is true for all who have been called – and are being called – by Christ into the family of God. Whatever you have done, wherever you have been, and whether you have been baptized or not... you are invited to be a child of God. And all God's children may look to the sacrament of Baptism as a symbol of God's grace to them through Christ.

Baptism is a sign and seal of your identity: you are a beloved child of God, with whom God is well pleased.

God is well-pleased to claim us as his own: to embrace us into covenant community, to unite us with Christ in his death to sin and resurrection to new life, and identify us as his beloved for all time. On that basis he is also well-pleased to send us out into this fallen world with a message of love. Because when we participate with Christ in his death to sin and resurrection to new life we also participate with him in his call to intercede with the Father on the world's behalf.

That's why we include the Prayers of Intercession (or Prayers of God's People) in our liturgy. It's not just the "long prayer" that we have to sit through every week; it's part of our baptismal identity! Did you know that Christ – as our Great High Priest – is in the presence of the Father even now, praying on our behalf and on behalf of the world? And we who are united with Christ through baptism are enfolded into his call to intercede. We have been made a priesthood of believers, joining with him in his prayers for us, for our community and for the world.

But it does not end there, because intercession is done both with word *and with action*. We are not only called to represent the world to God in our prayers but also to represent God to the world with our lives. Baptism sends us out to join God's work in the world. You know already that it will not be easy. Listen to what happened to Christ after *his* baptism:

## Call

**<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. <sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."**

Baptism prepares us to be sent out. If it is through Christ that we are adopted into God's love, then it is also through Christ that we are filled with the Holy Spirit and given the Spirit's gifts so that we might proclaim that love to the world. The heavens have been torn open and the Spirit has descended upon us too! That's why Paul begs the Ephesians to remember their baptism when they remember their call:

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.<sup>2</sup>*

He goes on to explain that the gifts given to the church have been given through the Holy Spirit (to *all* believers) for God's purposes in this world:

*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.<sup>3</sup>*

You have been given Spiritual gifts for the work of God in this world! And you have been called to use them! The theologian Frederick Buechner says that your call is "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." It's where your God-given joy in doing and creating and reaching out....meets the needs of the world. In baptism,

**In baptism, the gifts given to you by God for the flourishing of the world are consecrated for service.**

the gifts given to you by God for the flourishing of the world are consecrated for service. It is not that those who have not been baptized do not have gifts or a call, it is that in baptism those gifts are christened (they die to Christ and are brought to new life), they are dedicated to God for his use and released through the community into this world that God so loves.

Baptism is a sign and seal of our call: it consecrates the gifts God has given us and sends us out with those gifts to bless the world in Jesus' name.

## **Conclusion**

Well, after Calla and James and I walked down the aisle into the Covenant Community, I brought them back to the front and returned them to their parents so they could go back to their seats. A little while later, Calla's mother pulled me aside to tell me what happened as they left the stage that Sunday morning. Calla, who had been so anxious about being baptized, tugged her mother's hand as they were walking down the steps back their pew and said, "Mom, this is the best day of my life."

Yes. Every day is the best day of our life when we know that we have been claimed by a God of love and adopted into his family forever. Recently I heard that there is a sacraments class at the seminary in which they teach the students to "live wet." I think this is brilliant. A friend of mine (and Pastor Brian's and Pastor Megan's) tells the story of his own baptism which happened as an adult. He says that when he came up out of the water dripping and splattering water everywhere, an elder handed him a towel but said, "Never dry off."

People of God, never dry off. Live wet in the truth that you have been claimed by God, who calls you his Beloved. With you he is well pleased. Splatter water all over the place as you share the good news of that love with the world. What great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Vander Zee, Leonard. *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), p 83.

<sup>2</sup>Ephesians 4:1-6

<sup>3</sup>Ephesians 4:12,13

# God Sends Us

## **God sends.**

- God blesses us, puts his name upon us, and sends us into the world to participate in God's Story.<sup>xi</sup>

## *We respond...*

- ⇒ ...by living worshipful lives of grateful obedience that seek to make disciples of all nations<sup>xii</sup>, pursue justice, feed the hungry, care for those in need<sup>xiii</sup>, and bear the fruit of the Spirit<sup>xiv</sup>.

## Worship Is A Verb: God Sends Us

John 17

Sunday, February 8, 2015

Megan Hodgkin

### **I. We Can't Stay Here**

Are you familiar with the phrase, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here"? Perhaps you've overstayed your welcome in a friends' home, or maybe some relatives have lingered a little too long in yours. How would you feel if we ended our worship services with that phrase? That's what we tell our friends and family when we want them to know the party doesn't have to end, but it's time to go somewhere else. This is very, very oversimplified, but that is essentially the purpose of the "Sending" in every worship service. Of course, we would never use those words because the truth is that we are not being kicked out, we are receiving a blessing and being sent into the world to join God in mission.

Still, the truth is that we cannot stay here. In order to fulfill that blessing, we have to leave the sanctuary.

I was reminded of this, again, this week as several of us went on a bit of a field trip to explore some other church buildings and sanctuaries in order get ideas as the design for our new worship space begins to take shape. A lot of work goes into the planning and designing of a worship space. At it's best, the very architecture of a space helps tell the story of worship, the story of the Scriptures, the story of a prodigal God and his unending love for His people. It's appropriate to think carefully, to incorporate beauty and quality materials. When the space is well crafted, it can help us hear God's invitation to gather and provide an environment that encourages each movement of worship.

That includes this final movement - the Sending. When we began discussing the possibility of a building project at Fellowship, it became clear that the worship space would serve a very specific purpose: it would be a place where we would gather in order to be scattered. Do you remember that phrase? It came up often during the discernment process and continues to be a primary theme in the planning process. The sanctuary is not intended to be a container. It is not a box that holds all of the activity of worship and preserves it like a museum until the next Sunday. While all worship spaces are expected to be hospitable, they are also intended to function like a catapult, of sorts. We gather in the "bucket," and as the formal worship gathering unfolds we are lowered further and further, placing more and more tension on the system. Until the formal worship concludes and we are launched.

**We cannot stay here.  
Jesus sends us out, and he  
promises to go with us as  
our worship continues in  
the world.**

Launched into the world.

We don't have to go home, but we can't stay here.

## II. We Go With Jesus

We have to leave the sanctuary, but our worship doesn't have to end. In fact, it's meant to continue. We leave because Jesus tells us to. Remember the last words Jesus speaks to his disciples before he ascends to Heaven?:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, [he says.] Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

We leave because Jesus tells us to, and He promises to go with us:

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."<sup>1</sup>

We call these verses from the Gospel of Matthew, "The Great Commission." They are the command of Jesus for his followers, then and now.

The passage from John's gospel that we've heard this morning is one of the many ways Jesus tried to prepare the disciples to receive this command. In every gospel - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - there is a moment of prayer, a conversation between Jesus and the Father, just before Jesus is arrested and begins the journey toward the cross. Unlike the others, though, where Jesus retreats into solitude, John illustrates a moment shared in the presence of the disciples. After several chapters of Jesus teaching them about what is to come, John says he simply "looked up to heaven" and he began to pray.

Jesus is addressing the Father, but he also wants the disciples to hear. He wants them to be reminded of all that has happened: that He has revealed the Father, that they have received God's Word, that Jesus is in them just as the Father is in Jesus, and...this is, of course, our focus today...in the words of Lesslie Newbigin, that they "are to be launched into the life of the world as the continuance of his mission..."<sup>2</sup>

The "Sending," also often called the "benediction," is the final movement of worship where the words of God are spoken over God's people in blessing as we are sent into the world. This time, we are not the ones who pray. We are not requesting anything of God in this final moment because Jesus has already prayed over us and become the answer to the prayer - protecting us, sanctifying us, and sending us as a people set apart to join God in mission.

This is what's happening in the closing moments of every worship service. Like the sacraments, there are some things we can see - bread, cup, water - and others that we cannot - like the work of the Holy Spirit. In the "Sending," we see someone come to the front of the platform as the congregation stands. They usually raise their arms and speak words of Scripture, or at least words based on Scripture. What we don't see is the Spirit stirring in our midst, helping us receive this gift and encouraging us for the work ahead as we join God in mission.

The "Sending," also often called the "benediction," is the final movement of worship where the words of God are spoken over God's people in blessing as we are sent into the world.

Whether we speak the classic blessing of Israel - "The Lord bless you and keep you..." - or one of the many variations of Paul's blessings from the New Testament - usually something like, "The love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you..." - the purpose is always the same. We speak these words as a declaration of what we already know to be true - 1) we belong to God, 2) we are saved by the grace of Jesus and 3) by the power of the Spirit, Jesus is always with us as we move beyond the sanctuary to join him in mission in the world.

There are some who wonder why we raise our arms. Others debate about whether or not only ordained ministers can give this blessing. I remember when I was a seminary student that someone told me that if I ever give the blessing I could only raise one hand or raise both, but only to the height of my shoulder. Sounds kind of funny, right? There are good reasons to ask these questions, as we would never want to be irreverent or to inhibit God's work among his people. So different churches practice the "sending" or the "benediction" differently, but I'm sure we can all agree that the power of the moment does not lie in the person who speaks the words. The words are powerful because they are God's words. God's words of blessing for God's people.

God acts and, just like every other movement of worship, we respond. Our first response is to receive. What is an appropriate posture for receiving the blessing of the Lord? You may see many of us hold our hands in front of us. I know I often will bow my head. Again, not because I am praying, but as a gesture of reverence. A posture of humility, receiving a gift that I do not deserve from One who is so much greater than me. You may choose whatever posture helps you acknowledge and receive this great gift.

Then, our second response is to go. We cannot stay here. Jesus sends us out, and he promises to go with us as our worship continues in the world. As his prayer continues in John 17, Jesus adds:

"The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."<sup>3</sup>

### **III. Where Do We Go?**

So that the world may know. Where do we go after the "Sending"? We go into the world. We accept the invitation to "live wet." Remember that idea that Pastor Marijke offered last Sunday? As those who are washed in the waters of baptism and claimed as children of God, we never dry off. Ron Rienstra illustrates this metaphor in his study on worship that we've been using during this series. He explains that the Sending is supposed to remind us to live differently, "Live like someone who's forgiven, like someone who has 'Belongs to Jesus' stamped on her forehead."<sup>4</sup>

We call this sacramental living. Just as the sacraments are signs and seals of God's covenant of grace with us, the Church lives as a sign and seal in the world. Like a sign, we point to something else, or someone else. In our gathered worship, we defy the cultural norms of individualism and cynicism, and every other -ism. In our gathered worship, the Church represents God's vision to unify all of humanity, to gather Greek and Jew, male and female, every race, every status, every ability as one in Christ.

Lesslie Newbigin, a key theologian in the development of our understanding of the missional life, says the Church "...is the place where the glory of God...actually abides among us so that the love of God is available to sin-burdened men and women. It is the place where the power of God is manifested in a community of sinners. It is the place where the promise of Jesus is fulfilled: 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.'<sup>5</sup> It is the place where the reign of God is present as love shared among the unlovely."<sup>6</sup>

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church also exists as a seal - a confirmation of God's promises to love, to comfort, to establish justice and more. Remember Pastor Brian's illustration of a gesture that accompanies our promises (the kiss for Abby)? The Table and Water not only point us toward God, but also serve as tangible assurances of his promises to be with us, to save us, to love us. In our living, when we live in the grace of God (when we live "wet"!), we offer gestures - tangible assurances and reminders - to the world, affirming that God's grace and love are real.

This is what we mean when we say that our worship extends beyond the sanctuary. Our worship teaches us how to live. The movements of the “worship story” teach us rhythms of grace and the practices of generosity and hospitality.

One of the best examples comes from our brothers and sisters in the African American church. During the slave trade, they carried the spirituals that they sang in worship with them into the fields. Their worship shaped the way they lived in a spiritual way and a practical way - the songs were an encouragement to the soul and many of them also provided a rhythm for their work, giving them the energy to keep going in the hot sun under the watch of their masters.

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### III. Conclusion: What Is The World Jesus Wants Us To See?

This is the “worship story.” God gathers us into His presence. God speaks His word for us. God feeds us. God claims us as His own. And God sends us.

I believe the mark of any good story is that it changes you.

Have you ever been changed by a story? I would be surprised if you haven't. Perhaps it was unconscious or barely noticeable, but chances are that you have had this experience at one time or another. A good book comes to an end, the credits begin to roll at the end of the movie or applause quiets and the curtain is drawn on a theatrical production and something sticks with you. Perhaps it is a particular character, a profound or silly line, a compelling image or even a broad theme

For me, there are lots of examples, and one of the most significant is always the story of *Les Miserables*, a musical based on Victor Hugo's famous novel. It follows the story of peasants and guardians of the law in the midst of the revolution in France. I have had the privilege of seeing the story live on stage, as well as the beautiful film that was produced a couple years ago. Every time, as the finale builds, I find myself trying to hold back the tears as the cast belts out the refrain, “Will you join in our crusade? Who will be strong and stand with me? Beyond the barricade, is there a world you long to see?”<sup>7</sup>

Is there a world you long to see? This question often lingers with me for days afterward. Why? Mostly because the answer is “yes.” Yes, there is a world I long to see. Yes, I believe there are changes needed in our neighborhoods, our communities and our world. So, then, another question begins to nag at me even more: what am I willing to do about it? With these questions in my imagination, I read headlines differently. I read scripture differently. I feel differently, see differently and think differently than I did when the story began.

If that is true for a novel, for a film, and even for the stories shared by friends over coffee, then how much more powerful is the story of the gospel?

It was God who sent Jesus into the world with a very specific mission: to redeem the brokenness of creation and restore all things to God's design. Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension have accomplished exactly that. This redemption has been set in motion and Jesus has chosen the Church to steward the ongoing mission until He returns again and the mission is complete. We do not steward it instead of Him, but with Him.

So, imagine...what is the world that God longs to see? Where is Jesus cultivating restoration? How have you been a partner in that mission? Where might you be sent today?

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>2</sup> *Open Secret* by Lesslie Newbigin, p. 46

<sup>3</sup> John 17:22-23

<sup>4</sup> *Worship* by Ron Reinstra, p. 129

<sup>5</sup> John 12:32

<sup>6</sup> *Open Secret* by Lesslie Newbigin, p. 54

<sup>7</sup> *from Les Misérables*; Book by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg; Music by Claude-Michel Schönberg; Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer



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