

Call to Worship
First in a Series about Worship
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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Readings: Exodus 19:10-19
Psalm 148

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My friend Shannon Johnson Kershner, recently called as pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells a story about her mother returning from a church conference. Her mother talked enthusiastically about the different classes and choirs, handbells and Scottish dancing, but she said the best part of the conference was the worship. Assuming her mother would elaborate about the preaching or music, Shannon asked, “What did you like so much about the services?” and her mother answered – “The Call to Worship.”

“The Call to Worship?” she said. Then her mother explained: “First, someone would carry down a pitcher of water and pour it into the baptismal font and we would all say ‘The font of our identity.’ Then, another person would walk in carrying an open Bible and hold it up, and we would say, ‘The book of memory; the Word of life.’ Then a couple

of people would bring forward the bread and cup, place them on the Lord's Table, and we would say together 'Food for the journey.' Then," Shannon's mother said, and this was the part she found so moving, "the pastor would step forward, look into our eyes, and say, 'People of God, welcome home.'" ¹

On this Rally Day, a day to celebrate coming together again at the beginning of a new program year, if I were to put in just a few words what I hope for this community of faith, it would be something akin to that story: People of God, welcome home.

Be at home here in the presence of God; home in the company of brothers and sisters in Christ. Home in the family of the church in, the best sense of what those words "home" and "family" conjure up, where we are loved unconditionally, where we can be at peace with our faith *and* with our doubts, where we can find hope amid the harsh and fearful realities of the world, and where we can be strengthened to live joyful lives of Christian service.

Today, and in the coming weeks, we are going to consider what it is we do when we come together for worship. What difference does it make to gather at the hearth of faith? Each moment of our liturgy is layered in meaning, growing out of the depths of history, theology and tradition, with the explicit goal that in worship we will have a very present encounter with God.

As one liturgical scholar has written: "We gather for worship because each of us hopes to be called out of our stuck places, and into a new way of living. We come seeking a sip of that life-giving water. We come with divining sticks in hand hoping they will tremble and tell us where to dig deep. We come, some of us, with arms raised ready to receive what is offered, while others come clenched but hopeful. We come hoping our imaginations will be sparked. We come in our

¹ Shannon Johnson Kershner's story recounted in *The Weekly*, Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, 7/3/1998.

loneliness. We come with our despair, some ready to tell and others ready to listen. We come repenting and forgiving. We come wanting to know how we fit into this family of things... The Call to Worship gathers all these disparate elements together and sets them before God.”²

In the book of Exodus we pull back the curtain on the first act of corporate, public worship. As routine and ordinary as the rhythms of our worship might seem, the Bible reminds us we worship no ordinary God. In Exodus, we find a ragged bunch of freed slaves who have made good on their escape from Egypt. They have been wandering through a vast wilderness, bickering and griping, sometimes hungering and thirsting, occasionally fighting enemies along the way. They stumble across the desert to the mountain where Moses has promised they will meet the God who liberated them. They are cautioned that coming into the presence of the Creator of the heavens and the earth, their Liberator of the Exodus, is to encounter unbearable strength and might. There is mystery when the God of Sinai comes among them, accompanied by thunder and lightening, thick cloud and a deafening trumpet blast.

Clean up, Moses says. Wash your clothes, do not touch each other, make yourselves pure and get ready, but do not come too close to God, whose entrance into the world is always filled with mystery. There is power, too, when God comes down – a power so great the Bible tells us it can cause mountains to skip like rams, it can cause a mighty sea to stand up like a wall, it can bring life out of death.

As Amos Wilder put it in a poem:

Going to church is like approaching an open volcano
where the world is molten
and hearts are sifted.

The altar is like a third rail that spatters sparks,
the sanctuary is like the chamber next to the atomic oven;
there are invisible rays and you leave your watch outside.³

² Lisa Nichols Hickman, *The Worshipping Life*, p. 13.

³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching as Theology and Art*, p. 93.

In worship – as in no other place – we are called to experience this transcendent mystery, this unbelievable power capable of transforming the confusing, painful, terrifying stuff of our lives, and of our world, into love, hope, freedom and peace.

You may remember that this awesome God, who comes into our midst, shrouded in mystery and brimming over with power, first came close to these people of ancient Israel because God heard the cries of human suffering. That is the first thing that God revealed to Moses back at the burning bush in Chapter three: “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry... and indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.”

In worship, we come to praise this extraordinary God, in whose power and might resides, above all else, a concern for human suffering. Yours.... Mine.... Ours.... Those gathered in the overcrowded hospitals of Liberia dealing with the deadly Ebola virus, those on the barren war-raging plains of Syria and Iraq, those in danger on the streets of Philadelphia and our own neighborhoods, those of us in this sacred space with our inner concerns and our deepest fears. Every Call to Worship is a call to return to being who we truly are, a part of creation turned, with hope, toward a powerful, compassionate Creator.

Episcopal priest, Martha Sterne, has written about the one of her regular worshippers from her small parish in East Tennessee. It’s a good example, I think, of how we come into the presence of God, and how our lives can be transformed by worship.

On Sunday mornings Marmi Mairs was an eight o’clocker – a regular at the early service. Martha says you don’t mess with the liturgy or shift the time in summer for an eight-o’clocker in her little Episcopal church. That part of the flock seems to thrive on the same hill, of the

same pasture, beside the same water, week in and week out, year in and year out, and that's fine.

Marmi wasn't quite five feet tall, pushing seventy in casual good-looking clothes and curly cropped hair. She loved the University of Tennessee women's basketball team, the Lady Vols, and had her season tickets. She lived on a TVA lake, on family land. For years she was the vice mayor of Louisville, Tennessee, or as she said, the mayor of vice. She was blunt, opinionated and honest. She was a chemist by profession who married late in life to a much older man. They had eight or nine good years and then she nursed him as he died. A while after that, Marmi herself was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. That's when the connection between worship every Sunday at eight o'clock in the morning began to spill over so apparently into Marmi's everyday life.

"If you have lived for a while, you've been there," her pastor noted, recalling Marmi's story. "You have witnessed the sufferings of Christ as well as shared in the glory to be revealed." Worship's rhythms of pure grace, steadfast love and authentic community become apparent wherever you go.

After her diagnosis, people bearing the face of Jesus Christ began to show up, and Marmi became Christ for them too. A step-granddaughter showed up from Atlanta, a once geographically distant relation, she moved for a while to Tennessee and stayed to see her through. Marmi put her affairs in order. She called up the Episcopal diocesan camp director and directed him to come and get her pontoon boat for their church camp. She took a trip with an old childhood friend and had a ball. Marmi did not suffer fools gladly, and she thought the church was rather foolish and timid in the way they encouraged people to give money. She gave five percent of her estate to seven different ministries and charities, including the church, so thirty-five percent of her money went to work where she had served and had been served. She told her pastor to tell the story of her planning and giving so that others might do likewise.

Ornery on the one hand, and sweet on the other, once she landed in the hospital for good, she figured out that keeping Snickers bars in her room helped the nurses to like her. They quickly came to realize they didn't need the candy; they liked her for being ornery and authentic. Marmi went out of this world, knowing she triumphed in the sufferings of Christ, and through them the glory of God's everlasting love was revealed.

Her priest, Martha Sterne, later looked back at her beloved eight o'clock worshipper saying, "Thank God for the gift of the Christian vocation... What amazing realities people are called to witness and people of faith are called to name. In Marmi's life alone – what we have seen – horrific suffering, courage, laughter in the face of the awful, friendship beyond measure, gallantry, terrible, terrible sadness, doubt, despair, wonder, acceptance, reconciliation, peace at the end, and the grace of God that passes all understanding."

She concluded: Through those who gather for worship we get to witness the presence of the Lord in unspeakable and holy ways...⁴

So now, in the presence of God's mystery, and power, and compassion, people of God, welcome home.

AMEN.

⁴ Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*, p. 101-103.