

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Encouragement Along the Way: Worship
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Psalm 100; Luke 2:41-52

It was the same thing every week. On Sunday morning, my family would be up early. There would be breakfast and then my mom and dad would load my brothers and me into the station wagon and we would head for church. There we would set up the chairs in the temporary sanctuary and take our places. During the next hour we would sit in worship where every week we said the Apostle's Creed, the same prayer of confession, the Lord's Prayer, sang Holy, Holy, Holy...or so it seemed...and then waited for the lights to come down except where the pastor stood as he expounded on something that I could not understand. My brothers and I contented ourselves with drawing tanks, planes and battles on our bulletins, with our parents insuring that we were silent. In other words, it was boring. As soon as I turned sixteen and could get a job working on Sundays, I was out of there, planning never to return. Which I suppose might be the definition of irony considering what I do every Sunday. What happened? What happened was that in my early twenties when I was a newbie Christian, needing encouragement, I wandered into a church worship service and found the encouragement I needed to continue trying to discover what it meant to walk in the way of Jesus. In that moment worship went from boring to encouraging.

Before we move forward I want us to have a working definition of worship. The definition I will give you is my definition based on my understanding the scripture and worship's place in it. Worship then, is the intentional encounter of God and God's people for the purpose of encouraging God's people to walk in the way of God and Jesus. Let me say that again, worship is the intentional encounter of God and God's people for the purpose of encouraging God's people to walk in the way of God and Jesus. I realize that this makes worship appear to be all about us. But it isn't because it is about God encountering us and us encountering God. It is about us intentionally coming into the presence of the living God in order that God might encourage us in the mission that God has given us...to live in the way of God and Jesus...to bless the entire world. We can see this in Psalm 100 where the people "*come into God's presence with singing*" and "*thanksgiving*" because they know that God's "*steadfast love endures forever*" as does God's "*faithfulness to all generations.*" They are intentionally coming into the presence of the living God to be encouraged by God's love and faithfulness.

To understand more fully how worship encourages us I would like us to see it as a recipe for encouragement that has three ingredients. The first ingredient is people. Let me ask, how many of you here this morning have ever tried to lose weight, exercise or deal with an addiction on your own? How many of you were successful doing it all by yourselves? Yep, me neither. This is why organizations like AA or Weight Watchers have meetings. They have meetings because there is power in people. There is power in knowing that we are not alone in our struggles. There is power in the support that others give us. I would argue that this is one reason that worship in the scriptures is almost always communal worship. Worship is seldom if ever personal worship. It is communal because God understands that encouragement comes not only directly from God, but from those with whom we travel on the way. Look around you this morning. We are all here to encounter God. We are all here to be encouraged. We are here together. Here is encouragement...in people.

The second ingredient is place. A while back I was out in the hallway during the week when a woman and two children came out of the sanctuary. The woman told me that one of the boys wanted to show his friend “God’s house.” Now, we know that God isn’t contained by walls or only exists in one space. God can be worshipped anywhere. Yet God’s people have always been led to create sacred spaces. Whether it was a stone altar, or a tent of meeting in the wilderness, or a Temple in Jerusalem, God’s people have found that having a space dedicated to encountering God helps us to be focused and open to being encouraged by God. We can see this in the only story we have about Jesus’ boyhood. He and his family have traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. When the family leaves, Jesus stays behind, in what he describes as his Father’s house. Jesus understands the power of that sacred space; that in it he can be in God’s presence in a way that might be difficult in any other place. This is why this sanctuary matters. It matters because when we come here we can block out so much of the hustle and bustle of life and prepare ourselves to encounter God and to be encouraged. My hope is that this sacred place can be for us “God’s house” where God’s encouragement can be found.

The third ingredient is pattern. What I mean by that is that there is a pattern that offers us encouragement in and through worship. One of my vivid childhood memories is of coming home from school and seeing my mother bent over our dining table, with cloth spread out on it. On the cloth was pinned a pattern. I once asked her why she used patterns and her reply was because she wanted to be sure that the dress turned out exactly as it should. This is the same for the pattern of worship God offers us. If we follow it we find ourselves where we desire to be, encouraged in our desire to follow in the way of Jesus. This pattern has five pieces. First God calls us into encounter and we respond. What I mean by this is that we come to this sacred place to be with these people because God calls us, invites us to be here. This encourages us because we know that God wants us to be here regardless of who we are or what we have done or left undone. Second, God claims us as God’s own and we acknowledge that claim. This morning we were fortunate enough to have two baptisms in which we heard God claiming and parents responding. This is encouraging because it means not only that there are no “orphans” in this world, but that God will never abandon us because we are God’s children. Third, God forgives, and we confess. I know that that sounds backwards, but it isn’t. God’s forgiveness is always waiting for us ahead of our confession. Just as the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son runs to embrace his lost and found son, before his son can confess/God does the same for us. This encourages us because it means even when we fall short, we can begin again with God’s help. Fourth we are fed. We are fed with the Word and with the table. This is encouraging because we have been given the strength we need to go back into the world to follow in the way of Jesus. Finally, we are sent back out to try again. This is encouraging because it means God believes in our ability to live in the way of Jesus.

Last Sunday we talked about the fact that in the resurrection of Jesus we have been given the power and freedom to follow in the way of Jesus. We also acknowledged that to do so we need encouragement along the way. Today we have made our first stop of the way of encouragement, worship. My hope is that you will see worship not as some boring repetition of weekly rituals, but as an intentional opportunity to encounter the living God to find encouragement for the week ahead. And that is my challenge to you for this week, that when you return next week, you open yourselves to being encountered by the Living God, so that you will be more encouraged when you leave, than when you arrived.