

**WORSHIP***by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

In Hebrews 12, beginning at verse 22, we read this:

<sup>22</sup> You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant ...

<sup>28</sup> Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup> for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’

These words in Hebrews speak to the author’s conviction that there is an invisible realm of reality that was opened up for us through Jesus. It’s represented as Mount Zion, as the city of the living God, as the heavenly Jerusalem, all of which are references to places made sacred to Israel because of God’s presence with his people.

These words in Hebrews 12 invite us to worship. They are rooted in the conviction that through Jesus we enjoy perfect, unhindered fellowship with God. This is something previously only glimpsed by God’s people. It’s the home of angels and saints – the men and women of faith who had come before<sup>i</sup> – the so-called ‘great cloud of witnesses’.<sup>ii</sup>

There’s a similar image painted at the end of Revelation, in chapter 21, where we read this:

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

Many, many years earlier, before Revelation was written – before Jesus lived – the prophet Isaiah spoke these words from God in Isaiah 65:

<sup>17</sup> I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. <sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. <sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.<sup>iii</sup>

This promised future is the same one described in Hebrews. It’s the future made possible for us because of Jesus. It’s the fully realized kingdom of God we glimpse through Jesus’ life – through his miracles and in his teaching. It is a kingdom that cannot be shaken. It is our eternal home, where the words of worship we read from Revelation 5 at the beginning of our service today, ring and echo:

<sup>12</sup> Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!

<sup>13</sup> To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever! Amen.

Those words from Revelation 5 remind me of David's words of worship we read a few minutes ago, from 1 Chronicles 29:

- <sup>10</sup> 'Praise be to you, Lord,  
the God of our Father Israel,  
from everlasting to everlasting.
- <sup>11</sup> Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power  
and the glory and the majesty and the splendour,  
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.  
Yours, Lord, is the kingdom;  
you are exalted as head over all.'

Are you hearing some themes running through all of these Scripture passages – all of these declarations of worship?

This is the heart of worship. Worship is about recognizing God in all his glory and majesty. It's about awe. It's about thankfulness. It's about declaring God's sovereignty and holiness. It's about acknowledging Jesus' sacrifice and victory.

Worship cannot be reduced to a liturgy or ritual. It is not dependent on feelings. It is not an emotional response to music or spoken words. There may be an emotional response, but it is not the first thing. If it occurs, it flows out of worship, it is not the basis of our worship.

Ralph Martin, a New Testament scholar, defines worship as “the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his worthiness becomes the norm and inspiration of human living.”<sup>iv</sup>

Richard Foster writes of worship, that it is “our response to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father.”<sup>v</sup>

Dallas Willard, another Christian scholar, defines worship simply as ascribing “great worth to [God].”<sup>vi</sup>

One of the things I particularly appreciate about Dallas Willard's writing on worship, is his recognition that while we may experience God's presence as we worship, that experience is not what defines worship. “Worship,” he notes, “is our part.”<sup>vii</sup> It is our declaration of God's great worth. It is us actively dwelling on the greatness, the splendour, the majesty, the goodness, the faithfulness – all the aspects and activities of God. Christian worship in particular, is about filling “our minds and hearts with wonder at [Jesus] – the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor.”<sup>viii</sup> It is dwelling on all the aspects and activities of God. It is something we do, regardless of feeling or experience.

Worship is directed to God and is about God. It opens us to know God better. It inspires us to live in a way that honours God – to live in such a way that our very lives become an act of worship. That’s one of the things that Ralph Martin brings up when he talks about worship being the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his worthiness becomes the norm and the inspiration of human living. To live in a way that is inspired by God is, in itself, an act of worship.

In Deuteronomy 10 we read Moses’ words:

<sup>17</sup> The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, <sup>18</sup> who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. <sup>19</sup> You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. <sup>20</sup> You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. <sup>21</sup> He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.

This is the basis of our worship: God who has done and continues to do great and awesome things; God who has loved us so much that it cost him everything. When we gather for worship services, we read Scripture because the Bible reminds us of the things God has done, and it reminds us of who God is. We sing songs and hymns because they give voice to our worship – they speak of God’s activity, of God’s kingdom, of God’s character. When David established the tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant – which Moses built and into which Moses placed the tablets upon which were written God’s Law, he appointed particular people to the task of singing praises to the Lord. He said to them:

O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,  
 make known his deeds among the people.  
 Sing to him, sing praises to him,  
 tell of all his wonderful works.  
 Glory in his holy name;  
 let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.  
 Seek the Lord and his strength,  
 seek his presence continually.  
 Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
 his miracles, and the judgments he uttered.<sup>ix</sup>

“Make known his deeds,” “tell of all his wonderful works,” “remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered.”

This is worship. And this is why worship is a Spiritual Discipline. It is something we do. It is something we practice. We practice telling the wonderful works of the Lord. We practice making his deeds known. We practice telling the stories of God – stories from the Bible, from history, and from our own lives. We practice telling the stories, and we practice declaring God’s great worth, as revealed through those stories. We name him our refuge and strength; we name him faithful, good, patient, love; we name him King of kings and Lord of lords. We declare his

victory over sin and death. We proclaim the good news that his kingdom has come and will come. And in doing so, we worship.

Worship is not contingent on us feeling good. It is not contingent on us feeling grateful or thankful. It is not contingent on feelings at all. In fact, one of the greatest errors we make is to require that people feel a certain way as part of worship. Sometimes we forget this, particularly in our worship services. Sometimes we make it so there's only room for happy people in our worship services. Sometimes people are made to believe that they can only show up when they are able to clap and dance and sing songs of praise. But there is room in our worship for everything we feel. There's room for our anger. There's room for our sadness. There's room for our loneliness and heartbreak. There's room for our loss and our grief. Because God is in all of it with us.

That's the whole story of the incarnation – of God emptying himself to become one of us, to be born in human likeness, to live a human life among us. Jesus – God-with-us – knows what it is to be sad, to be angry, to grieve. He knows the full range of human experience and emotion. Why on earth would we think that our worship, which is directed to God who we know through and in Jesus... Why on earth would we think that our worship must only have room for the happy feelings – the positive experiences?

There is room in our worship for lament. There is room in our worship for all of it. Because as we worship – as we tell the stories of God, as we declare his worth, and as we give name to his character, we discover that God truly is present in it with us. We discover that we are not abandoned. We discover that God hears, that God cares, that God does not remain silent or inactive forever. We discover hope. And that hope, I think, is one of the great gifts of the Spiritual Discipline of worship – of all the Spiritual Disciplines, actually. All the Spiritual Disciplines put us in a position to know God and to know him better than we did. And as we know God, we discover that he is reliable. And as we discover that he is reliable, we can hope.

Psalms 22 is a great example of the connection between lament and worship and hope. It begins this way:

<sup>1</sup> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?

<sup>2</sup> My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.

After these words of pain, frustration, loss. These are the words Jesus spoke as he was dying on the cross. After these words are spoken, the psalmist practices the Spiritual Discipline of worship by telling the story of God. He says:

<sup>3</sup> Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the one Israel praises.

<sup>4</sup> In you our ancestors put their trust;

they trusted and you delivered them.

<sup>5</sup> To you they cried out and were saved;  
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

He's remembering the actions – the stories – of God from long ago, and they are speaking into his own lament. But the psalmist isn't quite ready – isn't quite able – to own his ancestors' story as his own. His lament continues:

<sup>6</sup> But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.  
<sup>7</sup> All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.  
<sup>8</sup> “He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him.  
Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

And then the Spiritual Discipline kicks in again at verse 9:

<sup>9</sup> Yet you brought me out of the womb;  
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.  
<sup>10</sup> From birth I was cast on you;  
From my mother's womb you have been my God.

Do you hear how his declaration of God's works has shifted? The first time through, he brought up his people's history. This time, it's his own story with God. This is such an important thing for us to notice.

Worship isn't just about telling the ancient stories of God. It's not just about Bible stories or Bible people. It's not even about the stories of God's involvement in the lives of the great saints of the Christian faith through history. It's about remembering and telling the stories of God in our own lives. It may be that we cannot connect with people like Moses or Isaiah or Peter or Paul. But we don't have to. Their stories are important. Their stories shine a bright light on God's character and activity. To tell their stories, is to worship. But our stories also reveal God's character and work. Seeing and telling the stories of God's presence in our own lives and in each other's lives is also worship. And sometimes, perhaps especially when we are in pain, sad, angry, alone, hurting – perhaps it is in these times in particular that we need to remember God's activity in our own lives and in the lives of people we know. This is where hope is birthed, in the womb of worship, which is all about actively dwelling on all the aspects and activities of God.

Here's the thing, though: if we wait until we are in pain, until we are suffering or hurting, to tell the stories of God's presence in our own lives – if we wait until then to try to notice God's presence in our own lives, we will probably fail. It's like waiting to learn first aid until you're bleeding profusely and in imminent danger of death. How much more helpful to learn first aid when you're healthy, and to practice the skills when there's no urgency, so that when there is urgency, the skills you've practiced will kick in regardless of the shape you're in.

We need to be learning to notice and tell the stories of God's presence in our lives – to declare God's character as revealed in our lives; we need to be practicing the Spiritual Discipline of worship, because doing so puts us in a position to know God and in knowing God there is strength – there is a strong, sturdy foundation that will not buckle even when life is hard, even when everything is awful.

Practicing the Spiritual Discipline of worship puts us in a position much like that of the psalmist from Psalm 22, who, though things truly were horrible, and it seemed as though God had abandoned him, was able to call to mind certain truths of God's character and thus not lose himself in his pain. He was able to say to God and about God, almost in the same breath as he pleaded for God to rescue him,

<sup>22</sup> I will declare your name to my people;

in the assembly I will praise you.

<sup>23</sup> You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you descendants of Jacob, honour him!

Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

<sup>24</sup> For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one;

he has not hidden his face from him

but has listened to his cry for help.

Wouldn't it be great if we could speak with equal confidence – if we could truly worship God, even (or perhaps especially) when we least feel like it?

The key is to practice. The key is to practice telling the stories of God – all the ways God has revealed himself through the pages of Scripture, in the lives of people through the ages right up to today. The key is to practice declaring the character of God as it is revealed through those stories – through those lives. The key is to practice the Spiritual Discipline of worship.

This week, I hope you will practice this Spiritual Discipline. Here's what I hope you will do:

Plot your life story onto some kind of a timeline. Don't worry about making it too specific or too detailed. Just get the main events. Then, identify key people in your life along that timeline and plot them in as best you can. Then, when you have the events and the people plotted, look to see where and how God showed up. Where and how did God make himself known? Where and how was God present with you, even if you didn't know it at the time? Do you see a God thread weaving through your story? It may be that you can't see the God thread. But I promise you it's there. That's why the next thing you'll do is likely the most important thing. Share your story, as you've plotted it on that timeline, with at least one other person. And as you share, ask that other person to listen and watch for the God thread. Even if you see God's presence with great clarity, still share your story and invite the other person to reflect back what they notice. As you do this together, as you identify and tell the story of God as it is revealed in your story, you are practicing the Spiritual Discipline of worship.

We need to practice telling the stories of God and I think it starts with telling how God has shown up in our own lives. It's all about worship. It's about declaring who God is as the one of extraordinary worth.

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<sup>i</sup> See Hebrews 11.

<sup>ii</sup> Hebrews 12:1.

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 65:17-19.

<sup>iv</sup> Ralph P. Martin. *The Purpose and Meaning of Worship*. Vol. 1, in *Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology: Word & Worship*, edited by James D. Berkley, 139 – 155. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 140.

<sup>v</sup> Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Revised Edition. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978, 1988), 158.

<sup>vi</sup> Dallas Willard. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 177.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:8-12.