

## THE WAY TO WORSHIP

Psalm 95:1-11

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

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### Psalm 95:1-11

- <sup>1</sup>O come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- <sup>2</sup>Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
- <sup>3</sup>For the LORD is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.
- <sup>4</sup>In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.
- <sup>5</sup>The sea is his, for he made it,  
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
- <sup>6</sup>O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
- <sup>7</sup>For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand.
- O that today you would listen to his voice!
- <sup>8</sup> Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
- <sup>9</sup>when your ancestors tested me,  
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
- <sup>10</sup>For forty years I loathed that generation  
and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,  
and they do not regard my ways.'
- <sup>11</sup>Therefore in my anger I swore,  
'They shall not enter my rest.'

On my second Sunday as your pastor, over 20 years ago now, I preached a sermon titled "Worship: The Highest Priority." I still believe that worship is the most important role, task, and mission of the church.

Our Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* lifts up the importance this way: "Worship is at the very heart of the church's life. All that the church is and does is rooted in its worship. The community of faith, gathered in response to God's call, is formed in its worship. Worship is the principal influence that shapes our faith, and is the most visible way we express the faith."

We have gathered together for a "worship service." The word "worship" comes from an old English word "worth-ship" which means to ascribe worth to, to

adore, to honor, to respect, to reverence. Through our words, prayers, and hymns we are ultimately attributing worth, honor, and respect to God. We sense God's love and guidance in our lives and we want to offer our praise and thanks to God.

The second word we often use is "service." Have you ever wondered why we use that word? Have you ever thought about worship as service? Worship is actually something we do for God. In this time, we are serving God. Worship then is more like service or work even, than it is recreation or entertainment.

If worship is this critical for our life as Christians then it is important for us from time to time to reflect upon our worship of God. Let's think together about what we do when we worship and why we do it.

Psalm 95 helps us in our thinking. The setting of today's psalm is the feast of tabernacles. Tabernacles was one of the three major festivals in ancient Israel, taking place in mid-October. It was a time to remember when they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. It was a time to give thanks for the bounty of that year's harvest. It was a time to remember when they did not respond to God's word. Psalm 95 describes a simple order of worship during that feast. It is a psalm with an exuberant opening and an austere conclusion.

Imagine the scene- Jewish pilgrims from the known world joining those from Jerusalem. They entered the temple singing enthusiastically: *"let us come into his presence with thanksgiving...come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!"*

What Psalm 95 does, I think, is describe three crucial elements of worship. **The first crucial element of worship is rejoicing in God's greatness.** We find that element prominent in the first five verses of the psalm: *"let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! <sup>2</sup>Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving. Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!"*

Why are we to rejoice? *"<sup>3</sup>For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods." In particular, the psalmist is struck by the creation of God: "<sup>4</sup>In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. <sup>5</sup>The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed."*

Later, we realize that this great God is also our God. The one who personally knows and takes care of us. *"<sup>7</sup>For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand."*

All throughout the psalms, God's people are excited about God's creative power. Every other psalm it seems is praising God's power and creative ability.

The people were excited about what God had done. The people were enthusiastic. The people were rejoicing. The people were "jazzed" about God.

We come to worship to rejoice. To give thanks for what God has done in our life. What God did 20 years ago, 3 months ago, what God did yesterday, what God will do next week. We praise God for the transformation in the world, in our church, for the changing of lives. We worship because we are excited about God!

We Presbyterians, it is true, are not as demonstrative as some Christians. That's probably an understatement. But, I for one, still think we can come rejoicing. We can sing the hymns we know with gusto, attempt the ones we don't know very well, we can pray the words so they become part of our inner lives rather than just words on a page.

In Psalm 150, we see great exuberance in praising God. The focus is on the variety of instruments that can be used to praise God: *"<sup>2</sup>Praise (God) for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! <sup>3</sup>Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! <sup>4</sup>Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! <sup>5</sup>Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!"*

Then the psalm concludes, the entire psalter of 150 psalms concludes: *"<sup>6</sup>Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!"*

It's interesting to compare a church crowd to a crowd at a major league baseball game. The home team is on the field. There's a runner on first. One out. The ball is smashed to second, he flips it to the shortstop who drills the ball to first. What does the crowd do? They're on their feet-yes!, cheering the home team into the dugout. We are excited, enthusiastic, rejoicing. I wonder sometimes why our worship is not more like that.

This psalm calls us to authentic worship. In worship, we rejoice in what God has done. That's the first element of worship.

**The second crucial element of worship is reverence.** We see that in verses 6 and 7 of the psalm: *"let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God."* To be fair, a baseball crowd is not like a church crowd probably because of reverence. Striking the balance between rejoicing and reverence is not always easy. Many churches emphasize one more than the other. Both are critical. We are not only excited about what God has done, but also respectful that God has a claim on our lives.

The way we design worship should include this element of reverence. Our prayers often bring us into God's presence helping us realize that we are not

God. The quiet mood and formality of our worship helps makes tangible our reverence and respect for the God who is the king over all gods.

In our psalm note the emphasis on posture- bowing and kneeling. The Israelites had something here. Like many of you I've been in church traditions where kneeling was a part of public worship. I am certain that kneeling does help us learn about reverence and respect for God's sovereignty. When was the last time you were on your knees before God?

In the church's history, the postures of worship have varied. Originally, the posture of prayer was standing up as it still is today in most Eastern Orthodox churches. Catholics often kneel for prayer, while Protestants often sit. It's interesting that sitting was not very common in the early church. In those days during the Lord's Supper, the bishops and priests were the only ones sitting. In the 12th century seating was added in the form of backless benches. It wasn't until the Reformation in the 16th century with long Protestant sermons and long Catholic musical presentations that seating became common for everyone. Whether we are sitting, standing, or kneeling- there is a place for reverence in the worship of God.

Lastly, **the third crucial element of worship is response to the word from God.** In verses 7 to 11 of our psalm there is a change in focus. "*We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.*" We are the sheep, God is the shepherd. We are to listen to the shepherd's voice and follow.

A leader, most likely a priest seems to now be speaking to the people in verse 7. They have come into God's presence rejoicing and expressing reverence and now they hear the word. What we find in the psalm is a solemn warning: "*O that today you would listen to God's voice. Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup>when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.*"

The feast of tabernacles as I have pointed out recalls for the people the time they spent in the wilderness. That time was a time of unfaithfulness towards God. You remember the story- God used Moses to lead the people out of Egypt where they had been enslaved. Once they were safe from the Egyptian forces, they began to complain. Complain about their surroundings, their selection of food, their availability of water, complain about the leadership of Moses (Exodus 17, Numbers 20).

They complained even though they had seen God at work and had the clear promise of God's presence among them. They heard the word, but did not listen. They heard the word but did not believe. They heard the word, but did not obey.

“They asked themselves, “Is the Lord among us or not?” There was a self-centered demand for signs and wonders. God was provoked by such conduct by the wilderness generation and he is provoked by this behavior at all times. It is a particular danger for the people of God. God’s angry resolve that the wilderness generation should not enter his rest refers to God’s decision not to allow them to enter the promised land as the goal and conclusion of their wandering. The past is a warning to the present. Just because the congregation who sings this psalm centuries later is now in the physical land does not mean that they have entered the rest of God in a spiritual sense. If they do not heed God’s voice today, they are still wandering in the wilderness (*Psalms* James Mays p. 307).

God responds strongly. The New Revised Standard Version uses a strong word in verse 10 God “loathed.” The Good News Bible captures the emphasis better perhaps when it says “God was disgusted.” Disgusted with people who came to worship, went through the motions, but did not heed the words of God, did not trust in the promised presence of God. The people of God are in the midst of celebration, and they hear this cold dose of reality. The people are warned- it could happen again, heed the words.

This is a serious, joyful business we’re about today and every Sunday morning. Worship is not only seeing our friends, or listening to some inspiring music, or showing up. Worship is hearing and responding to the word. The word read, proclaimed, sung, and made visible in the sacraments.

We hear that word through the Children’s Moment, the reading of scripture from the Old and New Testaments, from the musical anthems, and from the sermon which is intended to be primarily an exposition of the word of God found in the scriptures.

We not only hear and listen attentively to the word of God, we also respond to it. The epistle of James says: “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*” (James 1:22 NIV). We are to be doers of the word. As Jesus says, the wise person is the one “*who hears these words of mine and acts on them*” (Matthew 7:24).

What that response will be will vary from person to person. Some of us will be challenged to act differently in our careers. Some of us will for the first time realize that God has a claim on us and desires our response. Some of us will be challenged to deepen our commitment in this local congregation.

Some of us will gain new hope in a struggling situation. Some of us will see in a new way that we need to treat our spouse or children with more kindness and

gentleness. Some of us will simply realize that God wants more of us, wants to be more fully integrated into everything we are and everything we do.

Week after week our response may change. But worship is complete only with our response to the word. We need to approach worship with the thought- what does God have to say to me today? Where does my attitude need to be different? What does God want me to change?

The response to the word of God is obviously lived out from Monday through Saturday but please note that the response to the Word of God begins even within the service itself on Sunday. We respond to the word with the prayers of the people, with an affirmation of faith oftentimes, with the offering of our gifts and of our very selves, with the doxology, and with a hymn of response.

Psalm 95 has been an important psalm for the church. It has been used most often through the centuries as a Call to Worship. A call to God's people to participate in authentic worship.

Psalm 95 teaches us the way to worship. In our worship together on this day, and every Lord's Day, what is critical is that we rejoice, we are reverent, and we respond.

