

The Journey of Worship, Pt. 2
Stepping Into the Stream
Exodus 15, Revelation 4

**First Presbyterian Church
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Last week we talked about how worship locates us in a different kind of story. The world tells us a lot of stories about why we are here and what we are supposed to do. When we step into the story of Scripture, though, we get taken up into a better story. We get taken up into the one true story of a God who loved us so much that he sent his Son to seek the lost and redeem the sinful. In God's story I discover how I am a sinner saved by a grace, a prodigal welcomed home, and a royal ambassador sent out to proclaim the good news. The story of Jesus I hear in worship catches me up into the great purpose of God's work in the world.

Today we want to consider how worship takes us up into a different kind of *time*. Do you think much about time? How fast it goes when you are busy. How slowly it goes when you are lonely. How precious it is when you don't have enough. How heavy time is when you are in pain. Many of us are pierced by the swift passing of the days. As the seasons turn, memories of the same seasons past flood into us. We know the meaning of the old hymn which says, "Time like an ever rolling stream bears all its sons away; they fly forgotten as a dream dies at the break of day." Or we cry when Jean Valjean sings, "The summers die, one by one, how soon they fly on and on, and I am old, and will be gone. Bring him home." Many of us are prisoners of time. There's just so much pressure to get things done that every second demands to be filled. Or we are prisoners of time because it just lags. We are waiting, waiting to be free of the boredom and the pain of bodies that don't do what they used to. Time flies. Time pressures. Time drags. Time runs away.

In worship, we get freed from the tyranny of time. If we give ourselves to the hour, we get taken up into a very different kind of time. We step out of ordinary time and into God's time. We step out of ordinary life and into God's presence. Let me see if I can explain how this works. Good worship *remembers* what God has done in the past. Good worship *anticipates* what God will do in the future.¹ Recalling what God has done and declaring our hope in what God will do transforms the time of our present lives. We get taken up into the "right now" life of God as we celebrate what he has done in the past within the trust of what he will do in the future.

Let's look again at this great Song of Moses that we read in Exodus 15. The LORD I Am has just delivered his people through the Red Sea. He parted the waters so the people could pass safely through to freedom. He let the waters return on Pharaoh's army so they could never enslave God's people again. After such a mighty deliverance Moses sang,

I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

The song remembers what God has done. Pharaoh's chariots chased us. We were backed up against the sea. But you, LORD, blew the waters apart so we crossed on dry land. Then you let the waters collapse upon the enemy.

What the LORD did in history causes the people to know who the LORD is *right now*:

The LORD is my strength and my song;
And he has become my salvation.
Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

Knowing what the LORD has done, they praise him for who he is right now. But there's another dimension. The song of Moses anticipates what the LORD *will do* for his people in the future:

You will bring them in and
Plant them on your own mountain,
The place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode,
The sanctuary, O LORD, which your hands have established.
The LORD will reign forever and ever.

The God who saved us from our enemies will lead us to the Promised Land. The God who redeemed us from sin on the cross will return to set the entire world right. Time is not just running away into nothing. It is going somewhere.

Worship celebrates the past acts of the Triune God. Worship anticipates in hope the future acts of the Triune God. So worship rejoices in the immediate presence of our great God and Savior.

Let's consider how this works out in our passage from Revelation. The apostle John was exiled on a rocky island in the Mediterranean Sea. One Lord's Day, he received a vision of what is to come. He wrote down the vision we know today as the Book of Revelation. I love the way he begins his account. "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven!" (Rev. 4: 1). Someone left the door cracked. Somehow the side door to heaven's throne room got left open for a mere mortal man to peek through. What he saw astounded him. He saw a throne, and One seated on the throne, surrounded by 24 smaller thrones on which sat 24 elders clothed in white with golden crowns. From the throne there came flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Closer to throne were four fantastical creatures, full of wings and eyes, glorious in their splendor.

As John watched, he saw a drama unfolding before him. He writes that these four living creatures "never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.'" And whenever these four living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one on the throne, the 24 elders fall down from their thrones, casting their crowns before the LORD declaring, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things."

Now here's what's even wilder than the description of these heavenly beings. John starts telling the story like we normally do. This is what happened back on the day I had a heavenly vision. Once upon a time, in the past, I saw this. But when John gets to describing the worship of these creatures, he switches over to the present tense. He writes as if what he saw in the past is still going on, right now, even as we read his words. Right now, the four living creatures are crying out "Holy, holy, holy." Right now, the 24 elders are still falling down, casting their crowns and singing, "Worthy are you, our Lord and our God." This heavenly worship is going on even as I speak. At the heart of the universe, in the center of reality, at the throne of God, worship never ceases.

There is a stream of praise flowing through the creation. We don't usually have eyes to see it or ears to hear it. Does that make it not real? Hardly! Without special instruments, our eyes can see only a portion of the vast spectrum of light that exists in the universe. But we know ultraviolet rays exist. We can't hear the sound of an electron whirring around the nucleus of an atom, but we know there is one. Even more real than the thin slice of reality we perceive is the stream of worship that flows toward the throne of God. In fact, all creation, just by existing as the work of the creator, declares our Maker's praise. The rocks in their

solidness. The sea in its depths. The sun in its heat. The ice cap in its cold. The praise of God runs, skips, blows and radiates through the universe. All things by existing praise the Creator. But only the creatures with speech can voice this praise in words. We get to strike up that song. But we are only joining the heavenly beings who right now are praising God in words both high and holy.

This changes how we think of worship. Our worship is not a matter of initiating the praise of God. It's not a matter of creating something new, nor of generating a particular feeling in the congregation. We simply step into the stream of praise that began before the world was made. We take our turn. For this hour, in the central time zone of the United States in June of 2016, we get to join creation's praise. We get to splash in the water. When we finish and leave the church on our way to lunch, worship has not ceased. Only our conscious, active part has concluded for a while. Elsewhere someone else has taken up the song. But even if every church on the planet fell silent, the stream of God's worship continues flowing mightily, sustained by the heavenly beings and the created order itself. It's that great praise that we join every time we gather together.

Now let's think about how this understanding of worship affects us. Last week we said that the primary worship value of our church is the gospel. The story of Jesus who died for us and rose for us is at the heart of everything we say and do. This week we highlight another worship value. Worship *expresses* our praise. Worship also *forms* our praise. In fact, worship *forms us*. And that's God's plan! We are formed by worship in order that our expression of worship can deepen and grow.

For instance, we might think of a table blessing we teach to children: God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. That's a great and powerful prayer. God has given us our food because his character is that of love and goodness. So we praise him. By all means we should express that much about God in worship. But would you feel like we had done enough in forming our children if we never taught them more than that? Of course not! God is great, God is good is a wonderful place to start. But we want to go on. We want to learn how God solves the problem of our deep loneliness by coming to us as the man Jesus. We want to learn how God cleanses our guilt for doing wrong by the cross of Jesus. We want to learn how God answers the grief of people dying by the resurrection of Jesus. We want to learn how God comforts our anxiety with the peace that comes from knowing Jesus will return again to set things right.

So worship is always forming us even as we are expressing our praise and thanks. Worship carries us beyond where we are in the moment into God's presence. It pushes us, stretches us, fills us, deepens us, prods us and propels us. In worship, we enact the prayer Jesus taught us to pray constantly: your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In worship we discover God's heavenly will so that we can be formed by it in daily life. In worship we discover God's heavenly character so we can be shaped by it every hour.

And we discover how worship changes our very understanding of time. All week long we may be squeezed by time pressures. Or disheartened by having too much time on our hands. In worship, we participate in God's Sabbath rest. We cease from our daily work and enter his presence. We let the world turn without us and while we step into the stream of God's praise. We stop doing life's business and take up the business of God. We recall what he has done. In faith, we honor the God who has acted in the world. We anticipate what he will do. In hope, we declare that time is not running away over the cliff into nothingness. The world is heading for the full redemption of all creation when Christ returns. And that frees me to live in love in the present moment and in my present daily life. I cannot erase the past, but Christ forgives the sins of my past. I cannot control the future, but Christ promises to make all things come out right. So I am free. I am not controlled by the past's shame or the future's anxiety. I am right now in the stream of praise and therefore free to love. To give my life away. To live in my daily business with a higher purpose and a merrier heart.

This past week in Bible study, elder Scott Bardwell absolutely crushed the connection between worship and daily life when he said, "When I think about worship as remembering the past, anticipating the future and living in the present, I think of Paul's words. Now faith, hope and love remain. Faith grows from remembering what God has done. Hope grows from believing in what God will do. That frees me for the present to love. Love is the greatest because God is love and love is right now, always right now." That's why we worship! Worship returns to us the time for love. To participate in the God who is love. To step into the stream of praise that goes on from eternity to eternity and get absolutely soaking wet in love and joy. Then we go back into the world as different people. People who look like they have been away in a glorious country and are all lit up from their time there. People who have the scent of heaven's mountains about them, even in the Louisiana summer heat.

OK, so we close with a bit of advice. There is more going on in our hour of worship than most of us ever realize. That's a fact. But to get in on that fact, I

have to pay attention to this reality. I have to be mindful of the meaning of this hour. That means preparation. There is nothing like the hour of worship. I start preparing for it long before Sunday comes. I can read the Scripture text that's coming up. I can take time to pray for our worship and our worship leaders. I can arrive at church having already read the Bible and prayed. I can get sleep on Saturday night and get up early enough to come early to church. Come early enough to be settled. To speak to others. To get set. The whole worship service is a journey out of ordinary time into God's time. I don't want to fall behind because I come ten minutes late. People are already sailing down the stream of praise—I don't want to miss the moment. The truth is, you and I can't arrive late and unprepared for worship and expect the worship leaders to get us into this mystical awareness of heavenly reality by sheer skill. We are called to set aside this time, this sacred day and sacred hour to leave our time and enter God's time. We are called to plan for it and prepare for it.

For great treasure awaits us. As we celebrate what God has done in the past, we join the song of Moses: Sing unto the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously. In praise, we find that our own pasts get redeemed. As we proclaim in faith what God will do when Jesus returns, we join the song of Moses: he will create the new heavens and the new earth. In hope, our worry gets dissolved into trust. We get freed to return to daily life ready to fulfill our deepest purpose, to love as we have been loved. Dear ones, like children on summer holiday, let's keep splashing in the stream of worship.

¹ See Robert Webber, *Ancient Future Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).