

Sermon for Sunday, February 8, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Hallelujah!
How good it is to sing praises to our God!
how pleasant it is to honor him with praise!

The words that begin our psalm today
are familiar,
words that we've heard so many times
at the beginning of psalms.

They are an invitation to praise, an invitation to worship God.

Worship
is at the very center of our lives as Christians.
Here we are,
every Sunday morning, week after week,
gathering together in this place
to worship God.
But we don't talk about it a lot.
We almost take it for granted.
It's just something we do.

And yet it's not something
that many people around us do.
If you were to talk with your neighbors,
or your friends,
how many of them
get up on a Sunday morning
to go worship God.
Sport, yes; shopping, yes. But church?
Not so much.
Worship
is the one thing that we do
that makes us different
from every other community group and organization around us.
It sets us apart.

We worship God in Christ.

So let's talk a little bit more about it.

What is worship?

Why worship?

and how do we do it?

First, what is worship?

The word "worship"

comes from an Old English word

that means to acknowledge someone's worth, their dignity, their glory.

So when it comes to God, the act of worship
is to acknowledge God's worth, God's dignity, God's glory.

And that's exactly

what our psalm is doing today.

It talks about all the things that God has done

that makes God worthy

of praise:

rebuilding Jerusalem

gathering the exiled

healing the brokenhearted

binding up wounds.

counting the stars

lifting up the lowly,

making rain

growing plants

providing food for herds

and for young birds.

All of this

is talking about the worth,

the worthiness

the glory of God

that makes God

worthy of worship.

Another way of thinking about worship

is to go back to the original language used by the early church,

the word that came to be translated worship.

That word is leitourgia,
and in ancient Greece,
it was something that a wealthy patron did
as an act of service
to the people of his city,
a word that meant an act of service to the people,
and usually included
religious ritual.

But it was the word itself that the early church borrowed,
and used to talk about worship,
the word that became our word
liturgy,
and it literally means
the work of the people.
It is what we, all Christians,
offer to God.

And that of course leads us
to the next question,
Why worship God?

One answer is
the one I just talked about.
Because God deserves it.
It's a simple way of saying thank you
to the God who created us
and continues to bless us
and sustain us.

But there are other answers too.
One is that
worship
is an essential human activity.
Time after time
as they study different human cultures
anthropologists discover
patterns of worship.
Something about being human
gives us the impulse

to worship,
to give thanks and honor
to something outside ourselves.

We shouldn't be surprised by that.
After all, in the story of creation,
in the first book of the bible,
in Genesis chapter 1,
God is described
as making human beings
in God's own image.
We are a reflection
of God;
no wonder
we can't help
but want to reach out
to the one
who made us.

The first question of the Shorter Westminster Catechism
- if you've heard of it, you pronely associate it with Presbyterians,
but in fact it dates to a short period of time in the seventeenth century
when the Church of England and the Presbyterians
were all one church -
the first question of the Shorter Westminster Catechism
is this:
Q. What is the chief end of man?
Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Our very purpose, the way we were created
is to worship God.

That idea
was echoed in the first American book of Common Prayer,
published in 1789
which asks,
Question. What is thy duty towards God?

Answer. My duty towards God, is to believe in him, to fear him, and to love him with
all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength; to worship

him, to give him thanks, to put my whole trust in him, to call upon him, to honour his holy Name and his Word, and to serve him truly all the days of my life.

Or in the simplified words of our current prayer book,

Q. What is the duty of all Christians?

A. The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.

Our purpose and our duty
is to worship God.

Of course, that impulse to worship
can go astray.

We see it

in the first of the ten commandments:

I am the Lord your God: You shall have no other gods but me.

or in other translations,

You shall have no other gods before me.

We don't often think about having other gods - few if any of us

have shrines to other deities

in our living rooms -

but what it's really about

is anything that is more important to us

than God,

anything

that comes before God.

Because when that happens,

we are, in effect,

worshipping them

more than we worship God.

Whether it's sports,

or money,

or even our families - remember, Jesus had some hard words to say about that, telling his

disciples to leave their families behind, and come follow him -

nothing should come

before worshipping God.

But there are other reasons to worship God.

Not just because God deserves it;
not just because God commands it;
not just because we're made that way.

But because worship
benefits us
as much as it benefits God.
Worship grounds us.
It re-connects us
with the people we were made to be.
It brings us into God's presence.
It connects something deep within
our hearts
with the very heart of God.

So to our final question,
how do we worship?

One answer
is straightforward.
As Anglicans
we worship by the book,
the Book of Common Prayer.
That provides the basic structure, the content
of our worship.

But it's not the only answer.
Because often we ask
how do we worship?
How can we worship?

Our lives are crazy busy,
we hardly seem to be able to breathe.
We can make it once a month, but every week? It just seems too hard.

This is where
the wisdom of Jesus comes in.
Today's gospel
tells of one day
in Jesus life.

He was staying in a small town, at his disciple Simon Peter's family home.

First of all
he'd healed Simon Peter's mother in law;
then, as word spread,
person after person
came
wanting him to touch them, to heal them.
It was a relief
when night fell.

He'd been busy all day
teaching, healing;
finally
everyone was gone.
And he, and all his disciples, went to sleep.

But when they woke up,
probably woken
by the clamor of voices outside,
a whole new group of people
wanting to be healed,
Jesus was missing.

They finally tracked him down
high on a hillside
well away from the town.
"What are you doing? Everybody's looking for you!"
"I'm praying," he said.
Because Jesus knew
that he couldn't afford
for all the busyness in the world, even though
the people really wanted, really needed,
him,
all that
couldn't be allowed to get in the way
of his spending time with God.

How do we worship in the middle of our busy lives?
We have to decide to stop

and make time.
The other things
will wait.

And what I've found
is that when I do that
every thing else
still gets done.
When I put worshipping God first
everything else
falls into place.

And of course, it's easiest to do
when it's a habit.
After a while
it just becomes the thing that you do, something you don't even have to think of, like
brushing your teeth.
On Sundays you get up
and worship God.

But what about
when life is difficult
and God seems far away.

It's here
that we turn back to our psalm.

Because there, embedded in verses two and three
is a hint at who was originally saying this psalm.
It was people who had been affected by the exile.
People whose ancestral homes had been destroyed,
and families taken into captivity,
who had lost contact with their roots
and when they finally returned
after generations
didn't recognize the land that had been promised to them.
they had to start over from the beginning,
rebuilding
their community.

“The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem;” says the psalmist,
“he gathers the exiles of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.”

Those sound like brave words,
words of hopefulness
in the face of so much struggle.

But then the tone changes,
as the psalmist looks around -
the stars,
the sheep,
the baby birds chirping in their nest.
All those things are good;
all those things
are reasons to praise God.

And its the same for us.
When we struggle to worship, all we need to do
is show up
and look for one thing to give thanks for.
It might be the shape of a snowflake
or the baby in the next pew,
the color of the light shining through the stained glass
or
the smile of a greeter.

We come,
we come today to worship God.
the one who is great and mighty
and takes great delight in us.

Hallelujah!
How good it is to sing praises to our God! *
how pleasant it is to honor him with praise!