

Lent 3, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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“Come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.”

Those words will be familiar
to those of you
who grew up in the Episcopal Church
in the time
when Morning Prayer
was typically the standard Sunday service,
and Eucharist was reserved for 8am
and perhaps once a month at the main service.

Back in the time after the fall of the Roman Empire,
as predominantly pagan tribes invaded Europe,
monasteries were the places where the Christian faith
was kept alive,
and indeed thrived.
Missionaries were sent out from them,
and when they came to a place,
what they build was usually not just a church, but a new monastery, a religious community
where people could see this new faith
lived out, day by day.
And at the core of the monastic life was prayer,
usually seven or eight times a day.

But in our tradition, when the Church of England broke away from Rome
and Archbishop Cranmer, who we have a sculpture of in our cemetery,
when Cranmer developed the first prayer book in English,
those monastic prayer times were simplified to just two,
Morning and Evening Prayer,
and they became the normal pattern of worship in our tradition
for the next four hundred or so years, with the Eucharist, or Holy Communion as it was often
known, reserved for the 8am service and special occasions.

But in the second half of the twentieth century,
some ancient manuscripts were rediscovered,
and Christians across all denominations realized
that in the early church, the first couple hundred years after Jesus,
the normal pattern of worship was focussed around the Eucharist,

so we returned to that pattern,
 the Holy Eucharist as our main weekly service,
 and Morning Prayer only used on occasional Sundays
 and daily by any Christian who wants a structured pattern of prayer.

So here in our congregation today
 we probably have a mixture
 of those who grew up with Morning Prayer as the normal Sunday service
 and those who have only ever known the Eucharist.

And I think that there's a loss in there,
 because there is something different about Morning Prayer,
 something that we have perhaps lost
 over the years,
 and that something
 is captured in our psalm today, psalm ninety-five,
 which is combined with Psalm ninety-six
 to form the Venite,
 the canticle most commonly used
 early in the service of Morning Prayer,
 to call us
 to worship.

What Psalm 95 reminds us,
 and the Venite reminded us every week
 is that the primary reason we come together each Sunday
 is to worship God.

So what is worship?

The word itself
 at least in English,
 comes from an Old English root "worthship."
 We declare
 God's worth,
 God
 who, as our creator and savior
 is truly worthy of our ultimate allegiance and devotion.
 God, and God alone.

Another word for worship is liturgy,
 from a Greek word meaning "the work of the people."
 It's what we do.

God has created us and given us life;
God has forgiven us and saved us and promises us new life.
Our job, in response,
is to worship.

Because God offers us
above all else
is a relationship.
And like any relationship,
it requires time.
Time to talk together,
time simply to sit together,
time to know one another.
And that time
with God
comes in worship.

Worship is our side
of our relationship with God.

It's how God planned it
in the very beginning.
Back in creation,
in the garden of Eden
that beautiful safe place
that God created for humanity,
there God walked,
and there God waited
for us
to walk along too.

Remember how it was
when God was walking in the garden?
God was walking,
and wanted Adam and Eve
to join him.
“Where are you?”
But Adam and Eve
were hiding;
they'd eaten
the forbidden fruit,
and were afraid
of what God would say.

The story of the fall,
is the story of the human decision
to hide from God.

And the Bible
tells the rest of the story,
the constant question of God
“Where are you? Come walk with me.”

And our psalm, the psalm that has become so well known as part of the Venite
is that invitation again, come walk with God in worship.

1 Come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.

2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving *
and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.

3 For the LORD is a great God, *
and a great King above all gods.

4 In his hand are the caverns of the earth, *
and the heights of the hills are his also.

5 The sea is his, for he made it, *
and his hands have molded the dry land.

6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, *
and kneel before the LORD our Maker.

7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. *
Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!

But then the psalm shifts gear,
and it's a shift
that has been left out in the Venite.
Because it shifts from the invitation to worship
to a warning.

8 Harden not your hearts, as your forebears did in the wilderness, *
at Meribah, and on that day at Massah, when they tempted me.

9 They put me to the test, *
though they had seen my works.

10 Forty years long I detested that generation and said, *
"This people are wayward in their hearts; they do not know my ways."

11 So I swore in my wrath, *
"They shall not enter into my rest."

You know the story.
God led the people
safely out of Egypt,
safely out of the hands of Pharaoh.
But the palace was barely out of sight
before they began to doubt and complain.
And God rescued them again,
leading them safely across the Red Sea,
and still they continued to doubt and complain.
And God led them through the wilderness,
and when they were thirsty
cause water to come from a rock,
and you know what they did?
Yes, they continued to doubt and complain.

On the one hand
the wonderful invitation to worship the God who has blessed us so richly.
On the other
the temptation
to doubt and complain.

Doesn't it sound
just a little familiar?

I know it's there for me.
Sometimes
I find it hard
to worship.

Perhaps the first hymn is too boring, and I've sung it too often.
Perhaps it's too new, at least to me, and I don't know it.
Perhaps I just don't like it.

Perhaps I'm overtired

and don't want to be here.
Perhaps I don't really know anyone
and I don't quite feel at home.
Perhaps I know people all too well,
and I really don't want to look at that person over there.

Perhaps the children are too noisy
and they distract me.
Perhaps the silence
makes me uncomfortable.

Perhaps the liturgy has changed
and I don't like it.
Perhaps the words are old fashioned
and I struggle to say them.

Perhaps, perhaps.

The temptation, the temptation for us
is to see worship
as primarily for us.

But it's not. It's for God.
And while we might have our preferred ways to worship,
in the end
all that matters
is that we are here.
We are here,
to worship God.

And that
is an incredible privilege.
We get
to spend time
with our creator.

And everything else
is a bonus.

This invitation to worship
is a glorious one.
It reminds us
of how good God has been to us.

God who created not only us
but the whole of creation - something that we are acutely aware of
at this time of year,
as the birds begin to sing
and the branches begin to leaf out,
and the daffodil spears
have begun to show.

God is our creator;
how can we do anything other
than worship him.

And that invitation, grounded in God's creative gift to us
has a particular poignancy today
as we mourn the death of Margie Kreussling.
God gave her life,
and as we sat around her bed on Friday
with all the machinery removed,
and waited and prayed
as she slipped from life into death
and the line between the two was so fine
that we had to wait for the nurse to confirm it,
but also so final,
we were aware of the immensity of that gift of life,
and of the gift of new life
that she shares in now.

Come, come walk with God.
Come worship.