

Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Sometimes
you read something
that is a gift.
A gift
because it seems to speak directly
to the things that you have been thinking about, even struggling with,
- it's the gift of meeting someone - even if it's only on a page -
whose thinking somehow intersects
with yours.

That happened to me
this week.

Typically, when I write a sermon,
I begin early in the week by reading the texts that our lectionary sets for each Sunday,
praying them through, thinking about them,
and reading what others have said about the one I plan to focus on - this year it's the
reading from the psalms.

Sometimes something leaps out immediately at me,
and I begin to rearrange my thoughts around that theme.

Other times,
there's nothing,
and I continue to pray, and think, and struggle,
and hopefully some time before Sunday morning
I discover a word from God for us here in St James.

And then there are the times
when something leaps out
but it just doesn't seem
to go anywhere,
or at least,
it might head toward a nice academic article
but not something for us
as we strive to work out what it means
to live as followers of Jesus Christ

here on Long Island in 2015.

This week
was one of those weeks.
I read our psalm for today,
and what struck me
was that the two halves
are like concentric circles,
telling us about how it is
that we know
God.

In theological language
they speak of general revelation
and special revelation.
That is to say, they are two answers to the question,
how do we know God?

One way
is through general revelation,
that is,
we know God
through the things
that God has made,
we know God
through creation.
“The heavens declare the glory of God,”
as the psalm says,
“and the firmament shows his handiwork.”

And the second way
is through special revelation,
that is,
we know God
through the way God has been revealed to us.
And the primary way God is revealed to us
according to the Old Testament,
is through the law, the Torah, the first five books of the bible.
We can deduce things about God
through what God has commanded,

because what God has commanded
tells us what matters most to God,
it tells us
about the character
of God.

“By [the laws of the Lord] is your servant enlightened,” says the psalmist,
“and in keeping them there is great reward.”

And as Christians
we would add a third way of knowing God,
and that is through Jesus Christ, God incarnate.
We know God
through his Son.
Remember what Jesus said to his disciple Philip,
“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Three concentric circles
that tell us how it is
that we know God,
creation,
the law,
and Jesus Christ himself.

But as I thought about it,
I wondered, so what?
All that is true,
but does it make any difference
to us
and how we live
as followers of Christ?

And then I saw
a post on Facebook.

It was a quote
from Justin Welby
the Archbishop
of Canterbury.

Archbishop Welby
is an interesting person.
His original education
was in history and law,
and before he was ordained
he worked in the oil industry.
A major turning point in his life
was when his seven-month old daughter died in a car crash in France.
Six years later, after sensing a call from God,
he left his job in the oil industry,
to train for ordination.
After serving in a series of ordinary parishes,
he moved to Coventry Cathedral,
which you may know was almost totally destroyed by bombing in the second world war,
where he ran the reconciliation work based there,
helping with reconciliation processes in conflict torn-areas around the world.
And then he left,
and went to be dean of the cathedral in Liverpool,
in one of the most deprived areas in north-west Europe.
He then went to be shop of Durham,
and then just two years ago,
became Archbishop of Canterbury.

I say all that
because this is not someone who has lived a life removed from the pressures and
struggles
that all of us deal with every day.

So back to his quote on Facebook.
It comes from the inaugural Lambeth Lecture, the first of a series of talks
addressing key issues for the Church.
And he begins with these words:
“I want to start by saying just two simple sentences about the church. First, the church
exists to worship God in Jesus Christ.
Second, the Church exists to make new disciples of Jesus Christ.”

He goes on to say
that when he talks about making disciples
he's not just talking about words,
but also about actions.

And this is how
it connects with our psalm.
Because what if
our psalm is not so much about how we know God - though it does tell us about that - but
what if it is
an invitation to live
as the people of God?

Then that first half
about the heavens and all creation
celebrating God
is not something theoretical, telling us about God,
but is inviting us
to join in all creation
in worshipping God.

It's what we are created to do,
as human beings
and as followers of Christ,
worshipping God.

That's why the psalms
are full of invitations to worship,
to speak, to shout, to sing
in honor of God.
And it's why worship
was at the very center of the lives
of the first Christians.

From the very beginning of what we know as the church,
from the day of Pentecost,
believers, followers of Christ
gathered together to worship God.
They didn't have church buildings,
so they did it wherever they could,
gathering in synagogues
or homes
or even outdoors.

Where they worshipped
didn't matter to them;
what mattered
was that they came together,
came together regularly
to worship God.

And it didn't take long
for a pattern to become clear.
Most of them,
who had grown up in the Jewish faith,
were used to gathering on the Sabbath;
as Christians
they claimed the day of the resurrection,
the day Jesus rose from the dead,
Sunday,
as the day of their weekly worship.
And on Sundays
they gathered together to worship God,
to praise,
to give thanks,
to hear God's word in Scripture,
and to share in the holy meal
of the Eucharist.

That created a rhythm in their lives,
a habit
of work, and rest, and worship that grounded them,
and what they found
was that when they kept that habit, that pattern,
that weekly rhythm,
they could more easily recognize God
in the rest of their lives.

One of the shifts in our culture
in the last quarter century,
a shift that is reported on frequently on religious news sites,
is that where people used to go to church to worship God
every week,
those patterns of attendance

have changed.
We miss a week.
We go three out of four,
or two out of three, or every second week.

There are all sorts of reasons:
busier lives,
more options about what we can do with our time,
greater demands of work,
less social support for church.

But we miss something.
We miss
that essential grounding
in God,
that foundation
that shapes
the rest of our lives.
And there is something essential about that weekly rhythm of worship.

Because worship
centers us.
It grounds us
in our relationship with God,
and it grounds us
in the rest of our lives.

Or to think about it another way,
it allows us to step out of our daily lives
for just a moment
and into life with God
in a more concentrated way
so that when we step back in to the craziness of our schedules,
we bring some of that sense of the presence of God
back with us.

So a practical question.
How do we worship? How is it most effective?
My experience
is that worship is most effective

when we allow our whole selves to be caught upon it.

This isn't so much about removing distractions - the reality is that those distractions will always be there, whether it's kids being wriggly, or our minds buzzing with a thousand things, or our cell phones -

it's not so much about removing distractions
as bringing them with us
and offering them to God.

About doing our best to focus on what we're here to do - worship God -
rather than the things that distract us.

So making sure we follow the service, and participating as much as we can.

Most of us are pretty comfortable with saying words together;
singing, not so much.

But singing has always been part of worshipping God,
from the time of the psalms onwards.

If you're comfortable singing, sing out!

If you're not real comfortable, or if you're one of those people
who was told in school
just to keep your mouth shut because you couldn't hold a tune,
don't give in. You CAN learn to sing.

Just begin by opening the hymnal.

Read the words along as we sing. Aloud.

And then, allow your voice to go and down with the music.

And in time, you will find yourself singing with the rest of us.

Remember

this is about worshipping God,
not about how perfect our performance is.

And in any case,

God might like tuneful worship,
but God sees what is in our hearts,
and will accept our untuneful worship as well!

So that's the first part of our psalm. An invitation to worship.

And it's time I'm done speaking,
and we didn't get to the second half of the psalm, the part about the law,
the part about following God
in how we live,

being disciples.

But that's okay. Because if all we do,
if all we do
is worship God,
we will be being faithful,
a first step
to loving God
with our hearts and minds and souls and strength.
Amen.