

Article of Faith: Worship
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Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
September 4, 2017

Psalm 100

- 1 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
- 2 Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.
- 3 Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
- 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
- 5 For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

John 4: 16 – 26

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

For three years in the 1970s David Valen¹ was the senior Protestant chaplain at an air force base in the Midwest. One day Sgt. Bill Sochko came to his office. Bill said he was raised in the church but had long since fallen away. Now he wanted to reconnect. “How do I do that?” he asked. David responded “We worship at 1000 hours every Sunday, Bill, come and join us.”

[I’ll let David pick up the story in his own words.]

The next Sunday Bill was there. Soon I noticed that he was serving as an usher. Then he showed up at our weekly Bible study. For as long as my assignment lasted, Bill was totally involved in our chapel program.

But, as happens in the military, at some point I was reassigned. And soon after I was reassigned, the base closed.

Years later I had occasion to travel close to the old base and decided to check it out. I appeared abandoned. The gate was open—no security guards, no ID checks. I drove down the main drag toward the chapel. It was eerie, to say the least; no troops, no vehicles, just an empty, surreal silence.

When I noticed a car parked at the chapel, I decided to stop there on the chance that I might find an unlocked door. I did. I wandered around, finding that it looked very much like it had when I was there.

On my way out I noticed that the main office door was slightly ajar. Looking closer I saw an old man with a full, gray beard holding what appeared to be a Bible. In the room I saw two young people and concluded that he was conducting some sort of Bible study.

Not wanting to be too intrusive, I asked, “What happened to this base?” He said that after it was closed the state took it over and converted a portion of it to a correctional facility for youthful offenders.

“Is this still a chapel?” I asked?

“I got permission to run a religious program for the inmates. We worship there every week.”

“This is amazing,” was all I could say.

Then, turning to leave, I said, “I’m Chaplain Valen. I served here many years ago.”

“I know who you are,” he said with a broad smile. “I’m Bill Sochko.”

When Bill Sochko wanted to reconnect with his faith, the chaplain invited him to worship. And it was beginning for what Bill was created and called to be.

Worship, the last article of faith in our sermon series.

Chosen for today because we are beginning a new schedule here at Old Stone Presbyterian Church. A schedule which no longer has the 3rd graders through middle schoolers leaving after the Time with Young Church to attend Sunday School. A decision made by the Christian Education Committee and the Session because they recognize that, while it may

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-06/reversal>

I have slightly adapted the telling of the story (but not of the facts or details) for use in the sermon.

be quicker and in some ways more convenient for families to get “church done” in one hour... there is nothing,

nothing,

nothing

more important in the life of faith than worship.

This time that we spend together. Praising God. Studying. Praying. Singing. Listening.

As people of faith, we need worship. As Christians, we need to seek out other believers and be in relationship with them.

Worship is our most defining moment. It is when we are most together and most able to see and experience who we are and who we are as people who know that God, Emmanuel, is with us.

In worship we praise God, to acknowledge, as the Psalmist did in our Psalm reading for this morning, the wonders of God. To acknowledge who we are in this big picture, and most importantly, who God is.

We also come to worship change, to be more who God is calling us to be.² Richard Foster has written, “If worship does not change us, it has not been worship. To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change. Worship begins in holy expectancy; it ends in holy obedience.”³

And all of this happens very intentionally, each and every Sunday.

Sunday. We gather on this day not by chance, but because Sunday is resurrection Day. Even in Lent, when we set aside our alleluias and wander with Jesus in the wilderness, Sundays are resurrection days.

We gather here, in this place, as Christians. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek. No American or Afghan, Italian or Mexican. There is no male or female.⁴ We are one, we are together, we are Christians. Gathered as Christians gather all around the world, in our own languages, proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord.

One way that we demonstrate this is by where we sit. There are no rented pews. No assigned seats. Not separation of class or gender. Visitors, members, no one has more priority than another. Our faith is on display, from before the service even begins.

² While not quoted, I have relied a great deal on Robert McAfee Brown’s The Spirit of Protestantism for the structure of this sermon. New York: Oxford University Press, 1961. 131-143.

³ Martin H. Manser, Compiler. The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. Page 406.

⁴ From Galatians 3: 28 – 29.

And then, in our worship, we place the Word of God at the center. We prepare for it, in prayer and song We hear it. I do my best to proclaim it. And then we respond to it. By affirming our faith. Giving our tithes and offerings. Praying. And then continuing our response out into the world. What we need for our lives, each and every day, we get here. Grace. Hope. Vision. And a little more grace.

Worship, with the community of faith, the place where we can live our real truth. Not the truth of Christmas Cards and Facebook posts, like we like it to be, but the real truth that is often messier.

Pastor Shawnthea Monroe tells a wonderful story about about a time a few years ago when she got a terrible haircut, and she knew it was a terrible haircut, but everyone else in her life kept telling her it was fine. Until she went to church. When they told her the truth. And not only did they tell her the truth, they got her to the person who could fix it.⁵

We need worship. Each and every week. For faithful living, worship is our sustenance, which cannot be accessed occasionally if we want to remain strong. For the many decisions and delimmias you face each week- seeking to be a faithful child, parent, sibling, employee, employer, citizen. Child of God. Disciple of Jesus Christ.

Now... church worship isn't the only place where this kind of connection and faith development can happen. One of the most powerful worship experiences of my life happened at a Grateful Dead concert in Atlanta in the early 1990s, a story I'll tell another time. But why would we rely on finding water in the desert when there is a river of water just around the corner. Worship in church, with the faith community, cultivates something that is powerful- chemical changes that can actually be recorded as we sing and pray and welcome the divine into our lives and into our hearts.

Renown zoologist Calvin DeWitt found his vocation of studying animals at church.⁶ As they sang "All Creatures of our God and King." And as they sang the doxology, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise him all creatures here below." He says, "For me that song made total sense. The toad in my backyard and the hippo at the zoo were praising God. The snails in my aquariums were bringing peculiar honors to their King. The painted turtles in my pond were praising God too. Even the trees were clapping their hands (Isa. 55: 12)."

⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-07/sunday-august-7-2011>

⁶ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-03/ behold-hippo>

I first began to hear a call to ministry in the words of my middle school chaplain, and in singing the words from “I sing a song of the saints of God.” That told me I could be a priest- or a doctor or a shepherd or a soldier.⁷

And there are the bedsides and living rooms, more than I can count, with individuals whose memories have longed been socked in by the fog of dementia, who openly recognize of the prayers and music that make up what we do here, and in those words you can see the comfort of faith found and embraced. Words that they learned here.

Words of a God’s love. Illumined. Sanctified. For all those who are seeking. All those who are struggling. All those who are celebrating. All those who are mourning. In other words, you.

Thanks be to God for worship. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ <https://hymnary.org/text/i-sing-a-song-of-the-saints-of-god>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-i-sing-a-song-of-the-saints-of-god>