

“Face to Face” -- Message for July 11 & 13, 2008 -- Rev. Laurie McHugh  
Part Two in the Five Practices Series: Passionate Worship  
Text: Isaiah 6:1-8 and Revelation 7:9-17

Tonight/today I want to talk about worship -- what it is, why we do it, what we expect to happen. I preach about this from time to time because it's good for us to do, so you may hear a couple illustrations I've used before and I hope you won't mind. I also want to talk about Passionate Worship, the second of the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, a book by Bishop Robert Schnase that is the inspiration for this sermon series. To get everyone here on the same page, let me run through those five topics. I gave out a bookmark last week as a reminder – and there are extras for those of you who didn't get one – because I really think these practices are what the church is about. Keep these five in mind: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. I like these terms because they are practical and personal and memorable, and that makes them achievable. The churches that live out these practices are the ones that are bearing fruit today, and that's the reason for this series of talks.

So what is worship, and what is passionate worship?

You remember the story of when Moses was sent by God to the Pharaoh of Egypt? What was he commanded by God to say? (Wait for response.)

“Let my people go, *so that they may worship me*” (Ex 7:16; 8:1, 21; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7). Pastor Jack Hayford opened my eyes to this text at a conference several years ago now, and the realization kind of rocked my world. *So that they may worship me*. This phrase is repeated seven times in the story! It

wasn't just a ploy to trick the Pharaoh into letting the people go. The purpose of freedom was for worship! It's the reason for salvation. Worship is the reason we have been set free -- from all the powers that enslave us: so we can worship.

That's not something to be taken lightly. Indeed, as you read on in the Exodus story, when the people are freed and they finally do get to worship God, when they are finally ushered into God's presence, it's serious -- and even frightening -- business. No one but Moses is allowed to ever touch the holy mountain or the ark of God, lest they be killed.

Even if we're saved expressly for this purpose, this isn't necessarily a safe proposition, coming into God's presence. Catholic writer Annie Dillard asks why people think of church as a "safe" place. She writes: "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?" And then she adds:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return. (From *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 1982.)

In C.S. Lewis' classic *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there's a scene in which the four children, Lucy, Susan, Peter and Edmund, are learning from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan, the Great Lion, who is the Christ figure in the tale.

"Ooh," said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake" said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then isn't he safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."(Source: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950, pp. 79-80.)

Not safe, but good. Yeah, we're dealing with fire here. And because it is an encounter with God, worship transforms us. We have to expect to come away at least a little scorched, changed, different from when we came in.

You come in tired, and go away refreshed.

You come in empty, and find yourself filled.

You come in lost, and go feeling profoundly found.

You come in lonely, and leave having been touched by others and by God.

You come in sick, and go healed.

You come scared and anxious, and leave at peace and strong.

You come, depending on yourself and believing that the world depends on you, with the weight of the world on your shoulder, and you leave depending on God, and knowing the world depends on God, and you get your world orientation right.

You come self-centered, and leave others-centered and ready to serve.

That's the transformative power of worship. The outside circumstances may not change, but we change. And that makes all the difference.

Sometimes people come to me (it happened this week, in fact) telling me how much their lives have changed because they have begun coming to church. Some of them gush about it, actually. And there's a little voice in my head asking questions about this, because these are people who have done nothing more than come to worship. They haven't joined a Bible Study, they haven't gone deeper. They have felt welcome here, felt our hospitality, and they've come into the presence of God in worship. And their lives have changed. It amazes me. Sometimes they're ready for the next step toward discipleship, and sometimes they aren't. Sometimes I'll never see them at this church again! But God has done something profound in them. And it's happened in worship.

Worship is first of all an encounter with God, spending focused time in the presence of God. God is present all the time, but usually we aren't attuned to God's presence. Worship helps us do that -- gets our souls lined up, opens the eyes of our hearts.

But not only do we connect with God; we connect with other people. Corporate worship, with its music, sharing of prayer concerns, being together as a community, at times can help us focus better than we could worshipping alone. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Not because we can't worship by ourselves, but because we uniquely encounter Christ in the Other.

Worshipping with others also adds the element of accountability for our discipleship growth. I'll talk more about this next week in my sermon on intentional faith development, but I know a lot of people who need an exercise "buddy" -- someone who's also taking that walk or that run, so their excuses don't outweigh their good intentions to take care of their health. Corporate worship does the same thing for our spiritual health, calling us into regular contact with God, and nurturing our love relationship with God.

Worship isn't something to be taken for granted. When we sing our praises and God shows up, and align our wills with God's, we can expect -- and should expect -- amazing things to happen. People healed. People transformed. Lives changed. And if nothing's happening, it may be because we're taking the relationship for granted.

This is where we get to the question of what makes worship passionate.

Our band was leading a workshop at the Bishop's Confirmation Retreat a couple years ago when Kevin asked each of us to share with the young people our thoughts on the meaning of worship. And Bev Cotton, one of our drummers back then, put it this way. She said, "It's like when you were

a little kid, and your mom or dad would give you something really special, and you would reach up to hug them and say, ‘Thank you! I love you!’”

Worship is an embrace that feeds and nurtures our relationship with the God who loves us. And that’s something we should want to do often. Who wants to be kissed just once a year? And who wants to hear their beloved asking, “What’s in this for me?” Or sensing them holding back?

Don’t worry what you look like. Don’t worry what your voice sounds like. It’s not about us. It’s not about music. It’s about God – the irresistible grace of God. Our hearts, opened to God in praise, become the throne room where God can sit.

In Isaiah 6, the prophet has a vision of God sitting on a throne, surrounded by seraphim shouting “Holy, holy, holy!” It’s a picture much like the one in the New Testament, from Revelation 7, when the multitude of saints are standing before the throne of God, giving blessing and glory and honor, worshipping day and night. John says in that vision that these worshippers will hunger and thirst no more, and God will guide them to spring waters of life, and wipe every tear from their eyes (Rev 7:15-17). They’ve been saved, freed from bondage, so their hearts can rest in worship. We join those saints and those seraphim -- all of us. Worship is not a spectator sport!

Now, because worship is not only an encounter with God – it’s also an encounter with people – and because we care about extending radical hospitality – reflecting the qualities of the God we serve – passionate worship also seeks excellence. We strive for a sense of “flow” and timing and for the best quality of leadership so there aren’t distractions, but we

don't freak out when things don't go as planned. What we long for and strive for is a space where the Spirit of God can move in us, and sometimes those snafus are moments when God can break in. Our mistakes can opportunities for radical hospitality, when we extend grace to each other. Passionate worship may not always be perfect in form, but it's pure in heart, and that communicates welcome to and care for others and humility before God – and that's a good place to be.

Even the best worship, after all, with the finest music and excellent timing and open hearts and fervent prayers, pales in comparison with God's magnificence.

Thomas Long likens worship to a Mother's Day experience from his childhood when he and his brother surprised their parents with breakfast in bed:

We knocked on their bedroom door and entered with two glasses of orange juice, a freshly picked rose, the Sunday paper, and a cheery greeting: "Happy Mother's Day!" We told them just to stay in bed, relax, and read the paper. Breakfast was on the way. They played along amiably with the game, remaining serenely in bed thumbing through the paper and ignoring the sounds from the kitchen of glass shattering and grease fires being extinguished.

In due course my brother and I marched triumphantly into their room bearing steaming plates of ten-minute eggs, carbonized bacon, and biscuits that would challenge an apprentice stonemason. It was, our parents said as they wolfed it down, the most delicious breakfast

they had ever eaten. Love, evidently, is a wonderful spice. (*Source: Beyond the Worship Wars, © 2001 Alban Institute, Preface p. v*).

Long reflects on that Mother's Day breakfast of long ago and says:

Even when Christian worship is at its best ... It is always the work of amateurs, people who do this for love, kids in the kitchen overcooking the prayers, half-baking the sermons, and crashing and stumbling through the responses on the way to an act of adoration... The moment of truth in worship is when we emerge from the smoke-and-grease-filled kitchen with our little trays and enter with adoration into the presence of God. There we will find that God transforms our meager loaves and fishes into a feast of joy and welcomes us as children truly at home. Then, anxious and troubled though our lives may be, we take leave of our earthbound senses. Confident that we, so often lost in the bewilderments of life, have been found at last by the One to whom we finally belong. (*Source: Beyond the Worship Wars, © 2001 Alban Institute, Preface pp. ix-x*)

It's all burnt toast and over-crisp bacon, and God welcomes it like a loving parent who sees beyond the taste and nutritional value to the passionate heart of the children who offer an act of pure love. It's not about us, finally; it's all about God. May we draw near to God's presence today and every time we gather. May worship be our passion. Amen.