

Word of God: speak to us. Speak through us. Amen.

Who would ever have thought we would worship this way?

On the couch, at the table, in our pajamas, sharing crackers and juice?

For many, worship is something you go to, something you do.

But worship isn't something we "do." It is a connection of the heart.

Among the gifts of this dislocating time of pandemic and unrest is the
disruption of everything we thought we knew about worship.

Now we know, better than we knew before, that worship can happen anywhere,
at any time, with anyone, in virtual space or home space or church space.

Because worship always happens in God space.

Like Turning to Jesus, like Learning and Praying,

we Worship in the context of a relationship with God,

the God who made us, and loves us, who wants to be known by us.

The root of the word "worship" is "worth" – to worship is to
ascribe worth to something or someone. It is Worth-ship.

And the One to whom we ascribe ultimate worth is God.

Worship, even when it's activity and an event, is really all about God:

our expression of gratitude, of praise, of submission, of blessing to this One
from whom we believe all good things come, and to whom we belong.

True worship is more than devotion or responsibility or respect or politeness –
true worship is an act of love. It is a participation in passion.

It is a response to love – we love because God first loved us, says the scriptures.

Worship without love quickly gets dusty and stale and rote. Worship that is aware
of being in relationship with the living God – that is a lively and life-giving thing.

Every aspect of worship is intended to facilitate our encounter with God.

And any aspect of worship that does not do that should be replaced.

Holy space is meant to facilitate our encounter with God. Church spaces are
crafted evoke God, to lift our spirits into the presence of God.

But now, even in our little Zoom boxes, even in the debris of the living room
or kitchen, we can enter holy space the any time we invite Jesus to be here.

Our engagement with the sacred Word is meant to facilitate encounter with God.

Music and prayers are meant to facilitate an encounter with God.

The bread and wine, the Sacraments we enact in God's name,
are meant to facilitate an encounter with God.
Our gathering is meant to facilitate an encounter with God,
which is why worship is not a solitary activity.
You can worship on your own, but the spiritual practice of worship is communal.
God's love is poured out in community; we see Christ in each other.
So leave your video on during church, so others can see you.
Even apart, we become the Body of Christ as we are gathered,
and we carry that out when we go, so the world can see Christ.

Worship doesn't only happen at church services. Worship can happen anywhere
two or more people share stories about how God is moving in their lives.
I had a walk with my cousin this week, and I was talking about God stories,
so she said, "Tell me one." I selected one about a picnic on a beach in Turkey
that reminded me that God has unexpected feasts for us.
And I asked her to tell me one. That's worship, where God stories are shared.

That's what happened on the road to Emmaus that day. It was a Sunday.
Jesus' followers were still in utter grief at his crucifixion on Friday,
when they expected he would be spared, or save himself.
He wasn't – he died, brutally, horribly. The worst possible case came about.
And that Sunday, reports were circulating that the women who had gone to
his tomb early that morning to dress his body for burial, had found it empty.
So now, on top of the horror of Friday, it looked like his body had been stolen.
Any of us experience bad news on top of bad news lately?

And now there were stories that people had seen him, had talked with him,
he had talked with people, had said, "Go on ahead to Galilee – I'll meet you
there." They did not know what to think.

Two of the disciples headed to a place called Emmaus –
we don't know what their errand was, or if they were just getting out of Dodge.
They were walking down the road, talking about these things, just as you and I
may talk about what's happened in our lives this week, what we're feeling like.
A traveler walked up to meet them, and he said, "What are you talking about?"
This would be like someone asking what we mean by Covid-19.
They were like, "Have you been under a rock? You don't know what's been
happening this week, how the one we thought was the Messiah was arrested
and crucified and actually died, and now, even worse, his body is missing?"

The stranger explains to them their own scriptures, and how what they're going through now shows up in the scriptures, and was foretold,
and how God is acting in the way he said he would be.
And he says, "How slow you are to believe what God said through the prophets!"

He opens the scriptures for them. That's what I hope happens for us –
in hearing the Bible read, in singing about it, and in my attempts to proclaim
the Good News in it - I hope it relates to what is going on in your life,
and sets your life in the context of God's great marvelous plan.

We talk about trying to make the scriptures relevant to us –
but in worship we discover it's we who must be made relevant to the
revelation of God, what God has been doing and saying for all time,
even as our interpretation, guided by the Spirit, is ever unfolding.

The two are so compelled by the conversation they are having with this man,
that they get to Emmaus in no time; seven miles just fly by.

They say, "It's suppertime. Stay with us, for evening is at hand. Eat with us."
So he sat with them at supper, and bread was brought. And he took the bread,
and he blessed, and he broke it – and their eyes were opened.

They said, "Whoa – where have we seen this before?" And they realize –
"We didn't recognize him with our eyes, but our spirits know. This is Jesus!"
So maybe it doesn't matter that we can't see Jesus with our eyes –
we learn to recognize his presence.

The practice of worship helps us tune our antennae to know when he's with us.
At the moment they realize who he is, he vanishes. And they say, "Were not
our hearts burning within us when he opened the Scripture to us on the road?"
And they ran back, in the dark, seven miles, to tell.

This story contains so much of the practice of Worship. We come with all that
we are, and are blessed, and we go and take that blessing out.
It's vertical and horizontal. If worship is an act of love between us and God,
it is also intended to be an act of love between us and other people –
our fellow congregants, sure, but even more those who are outside our circles.
We make ourselves available to God, and become more available to other people.
We open our spirit to receive more and more of God's spirit. We let God
make space in us to hold more and more of God's love for the world.
True worship will lead to justice, which is another form of worship.

Listen again to this exciting promise in Isaiah – that God’s house will be open to all who call on God’s name, even the eunuch and the foreigner. Now, eunuchs were damaged goods; and the injured or maimed could not be part of the temple community, or so taught some interpretations of the Law. And aliens were by definition ruled out. But hear what God spoke: *Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it and hold fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

It’s hard for us to comprehend how radical a promise this is, for there were strands in Israel that exist in Christianity, that said only the “insiders” and “pure” were acceptable. God says, everyone is welcome in my house, no matter their sexual orientation or political leanings or ethnicity or racial make-up or economic status. Everyone who wants to come. That is the future of all worship, my friends. That is God’s desire for our churches, that they shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

It’s up to us to invite “all peoples” into this house, online or in the building. Right now, I want you to think of one person who might be hungry for a real encounter with God – a friend or colleague or someone you know slightly. Hold that name or face in your mind’s eye for a moment. Ask God how you might have a conversation. Keep praying this week – and see if you won’t find a way to connect with that person. Maybe it’ll be just a conversation where you say, “Tell me a God story.” Maybe it’ll be “want to join me on Zoom next Sunday?”

Worship is an act of love. Let that love in. Let that love out, like breathing. That’s worship.

Amen.

Luke 24:28-35

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Isaiah 56:1-7

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

² Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it and refrains from doing any evil.

³ Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
'The Lord will surely separate me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'

⁴ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it and hold fast my covenant—

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of
prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices

will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.