

EXALTING IN WORSHIP

Back in February a new movie was released called Big Miracle. It is based on a true story. In Oct of 1988 the world watched as three gray whales became trapped by the ice off Point Barrow, Alaska. They were battered and bloody, gasping for breath at a hole in the ice. Their only hope was to be transported five miles past the ice pack to open sea. Rescuers began cutting a string of breathing holes about twenty yards apart in the six-inch-thick ice. For eight days they coaxed the whales from one hole to the next, mile after mile. Along the way, one of the trio vanished and was presumed dead. But finally, with the help of Russian icebreakers, the whales Putu and Siku swam to freedom. In a way, worship is a string of breathing holes the Lord provides his people. Battered and bruised in a world frozen over with greed, selfishness, and hatred, we rise for air in church, a place to breathe again, to be loved and encouraged, until that day when the Lord forever shatters the ice cap.

Unfortunately this is not always the case. Often people do not look forward to Sunday mornings. In fact, some people dread them. They are seen as things to be endured instead of life giving moments. The problem is focus. What was your focus as you came for worship today?

John 12:9 Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, 11 for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. 12 The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 13 They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" 14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, 15 "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." 16 At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. 17 Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. 18 Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" 20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus."

1. Worship is Inspired – flowing from a changed life

This passage has often been referred to as the Triumphal Entry. It is at this time that Jesus is at the height of His public ministry. He is recognized as being the Messiah. In Matthew it says "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" In Mark it says: "Hosanna - Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David". In Luke it says "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" The word Hosanna means "Save us now!" and was an expression of praise. The crowds recognized who Jesus was. In Luke 19:37 it says they did this based on "all the miracles they had seen". Here it says that the crowd who had seen Lazarus raised from death spread the word and this is why people went out to meet him.

The crowd worshipped Jesus out on the basis of what they had seen and heard. Lazarus was living proof of His power and authority. Their actions were an expression of joy from a life that had been changed. How about you? What did your worship today flow from?

It is an awesome thing to look out at the church in worship and to see so many who have been brought back from death to life. In worship our focus is on God and what He has done.

Unfortunately our focus in worship is often on ourselves and what we want to receive rather than give. Contrast this group to the crowd that followed Jesus after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus said to them “you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.” – John 6:26 They weren’t there for what they could give but what they could get from Him. Often our worship is us directed instead of being God directed.

This can be true of worship on Sundays. During our worship time this morning, where was your focus? I have heard people say to me before “I didn’t get anything out of the worship”. My response is always the same, “What did you give?” Many churches today struggle with the worship wars which are really just stylistic cultural preferences. Some have asked me “do you prefer hymns or choruses” and I respond “Yes”. Music is a vehicle. It is not good or bad. There is no such thing as a bad beat. Music is simply the packaging for the message. As each generation changes the message stays the same but the packaging changes to reflect that generation.

The organ originally was brought into the church for the purpose of evangelism. Organs were used in bars and taverns and were brought into the church to attract non-Christians. Many of the old familiar hymns we sing today were originally written to the secular music of the day. Take your favorite song on the radio and change the words and you have a hymn 200 years from now.

John Wesley said that the church must become “more vile” in order to reach the common person

General William Booth asked “why should the devil have all the good music” and took the songs of his day and put Christian words to them.

People have always resisted been resistant to changing music styles. Look at these real letters:

Dear Minister, what’s wrong with the inspiring hymns that we grew up with. When I go to church it is to worship God and not to be distracted by new songs. Last Sundays was particularly unnerving. - 1890 (What a friend we have in Jesus)

Pastor, I am no music scholar, but I feel that I know appropriate church music when I hear it. Last Sundays hymn, if you can call it that, sounded like a sentimental love ballet one would expect to hear crooned in a saloon. If you insist in exposing us to rubbish like this in God’s house don’t be surprised if men of the faith will look for a new place to worship. The hymns of the faith we grew up with are all that we need. - 1863 (Just as I Am)

Pastor, Was that the organists idea or yours? - 1874 (I Love to Tell the Story)

Worship is God directed. It is not always easy and usually requires a sacrifice on our part. I have come to church many times and not ‘felt’ like worshipping but, after coming to the altar and offering my sacrifice of praise, my heart and soul was lifted.

I think it was Charles Swindoll who said, “We have become a generation of people who worship our work, work at our play and play at our worship.” Leonard Sweet wrote: “Our pews are occupied by people who want to be moved, but who don’t want to move.” We crave the experience of worship but don’t work towards it. But worship is what we were created for.

Worship is inspired and flows from a changed life. We need to stop looking at the packaging and focus on the message. Don't just stand there looking at the words. Enter in and make the song your expression of thanks. Focus on who God is and what God has done for you.

Longfellow could take a worthless piece of paper, write a poem on it, and instantly make it worth thousands of dollars -- and it's called genius. Rockefeller could sign his name to a piece of paper and make it worth millions of dollars -- and it's called riches. A mechanic can take material worth only five dollars and make it worth five hundred -- and it's called skill. An artist can take a fifty-cent piece of canvas, paint a picture on it, and make it worth thousands of dollars -- and it's called art. Jesus Christ can take a worthless, sinful life, wash it in His blood, put His Spirit in it, and make it valuable to God -- and that's called a miracle. The Lord is in the business of taking rough, raw material and using it -- transforming men by His power to be the extension of His work in the world. That is what inspires our worship.

2. Worship is Inevitable – it is a fact of life

When the Pharisees saw what was happening they reacted strongly. They thought to kill Lazarus thinking that it would stop what was happening – but it would not have. Everything they had tried had failed. They said "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" In the Luke account we read:

Luke 19:37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 38 "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" 40 "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

Kill Lazarus and the worship will not cease. Tell the people to be silent and it will not stop the worship. They killed Jesus and yet 2000 years latter the worship continues. All creation sings praise to God. There is power in worship. It cannot be stopped. The kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing and there is nothing that the devil can do to stop it. Yes he can try to make things difficult – but God's plan will be victorious. It is just a matter of time. Part of worship is the sure hope we have that God's kingdom is moving forward.

Hab 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

Two men were talking over coffee one day. One said: "I'm concerned about my wife. She talks to herself a lot these days." The other said: "Mine does too, but she doesn't know it. She thinks I'm listening." Is Worship primarily about God listening to us, or us listening to God? Worship is all around us if we will only choose to listen and join in.

3. Worship is an Invitation – calling us to a new life

Following the World Series, L.A. Dodger Orel Hershiser delighted the late night host Jonny Carson with a sample of songs he sang to calm himself between innings. Carson recalled that Hershiser, an outspoken Christian, caught him a bit off guard by actually singing the Doxology on the live program, but added that he was "moved" by it. So moved he used the segment to wrap up the show's 27th anniversary program. There is something about praise and worship that is powerful.

People are drawn to worship. There is something about it that is contagious. Worship transforms us. In worship the veil between heaven and earth is parted and we are able to see God in a new way.

Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God; it whets our appetite. -- Eugene H. Peterson

The worship drew the attention of the people on the road that day. They saw what was happening and were drawn to it. What was their response to what they saw?

Matt 21:10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

John 12:20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus."

The reaction to worship was that some Greek Gentiles came and said "we want to see Jesus". People are drawn to Christ when they see Him magnified in the worship of His people. There is power in the testimony of people whose lives have been raised and transformed.

The easiest form of evangelism is still the simple act of inviting someone to church. I know that there are some people that really disagree with that. They say that church must be incarnational and not attractional. I think it should be both. I say that because I think the early church was both.

A recent survey in the US pointed out the fact that ninety-six percent of the unchurched are at least somewhat likely to attend church if they are invited. Perhaps I need to restate it. *More than nine out of 10 of the unchurched said they would come to church if they were invited.* If you glean anything from this article, please remember this point.

They estimated that 160 million people in the United States are unchurched if you define unchurched as attending church two or less times in a year. If their research is close to accurate, the implications are staggering. More than 153 million people would start attending church if they were invited!

What constitutes an invitation? For many of the unchurched, it was a simple invitation to come and join them one Sunday. For others, it was an invitation that included an offer to meet someone at the church to show them around or walk them in the building. In either case, the process was pretty basic. If you invite them, the odds are that they will come.

Sadly the study also showed that only 2 percent of the church members invited an unchurched person to church. Perhaps the evangelistic apathy so evident in many of our churches can be explained by a simple laziness on the part of church members in inviting others to church.

I remember a night when we had an outdoor worship event in Kuwait. As the music was playing and everyone was singing and the banners were waving some Arab youth were walking by outside the compound. They were drawn by the music and joined in our Night of Joy celebration. They were deeply moved by the event.

What was Jesus thinking while all this celebration was going on. We read in Luke that he looked to Jerusalem and wept. He knew that many, though they saw the miracle, would not believe. If only they had understood who it was that was entering the city.

The Pharisees missed it. They missed the opportunity because they did not understand who it was that was passing by them. Perhaps you are here this morning and you have missed the worship. Don't miss this opportunity when Jesus is passing by just because you are not familiar with the packaging.

Have you made up your mind about Jesus this morning? Don't let Him ride by without acknowledging Him. Look around you, can't you see the miracles? The miracles of changed lives and hearts.

A little boy who lived out in the country around the turn of the century. He had never seen a traveling circus, and one was coming to his town on Saturday. When he asked his father for permission to go, his dad said he could providing his chores were done early. Saturday morning came. Chores finished, the little boy asked his father for some money to go to the circus. His dad reached down in his overalls and pulled out a dollar bill, the most money the boy had ever seen at one time. Off the little wide-eyed fellow went.

As he approached the town, he saw people lining the streets. Peering through the line at one point, he got his first glimpse of the parade. There were animals in cages and marching bands. Finally, a clown was seen bringing up the rear of the parade. The little boy was so excited that when the clown passed, he reached in his pocket and handed him the precious dollar bill. Thinking he had seen the circus when he had only seen the parade, the little boy turned around and went home.

Isn't it sad that some people come to church like this little boy who went to the circus? They may come with the intent to worship God, but all they see is the parade – the parade of liturgy, hymn singings, prayers, and preaching. They peer through their pews at all the activity and then turn to go home at 12:00 noon; thinking they have been to God's house, but yet they missed the main event.

Worship is an invitation – so let me extend that invitation to everyone here this morning. Listen to your heart, can't you feel the Holy Spirit drawing you? What will you do with Jesus this morning?