3/29-3/1-20 A Living Hallelujah Rev. Amy Haines

Ps 95:1-7, 1 Thess 5:16-18 Lent: Walking with Jesus

When we gather for worship on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning, what’s your favorite part of worship? Is it the music or communion? Is it the offering or the prayer time? Is it the sermon or the fellowship with other Christians? Take 30 seconds and share with the person next to you your favorite part of worship.

Each year during confirmation, I have the confirmands and their mentors ask this question of one another. I also ask them to honestly answer what is their least favorite parts of worship.

And they don’t offend me when they say the sermon.

Now consider this question a little differently…Where do you most experience God in worship?

I have found that often that question has a different answer depending on the worship service, my faith journey and life’s circumstances at that moment. There are often days where I experience God most through music. The genre of music doesn’t matter. Music speaks to my heart. There are other days I experience God most through the Scripture. A word or phrase will speak to me with the challenge or blessing I need that day. Then there are days where the quietness of individual prayer is powerful worship. Then at Annual Conference, I often experience God through the joy of the ushers collecting our missional offering. Whatever our favorite and least favorite parts of worship may be, worship invites us into the presence of God,

to respond to God with our prayer and praise.

Worship is one of several spiritual practices, or as I call them, holy habits, that grow our relationship with God. These holy habits are not new. Jesus lived by them. They are illustrated throughout Scripture. They have been the foundation for a relationship between God and God’s people across generations.

Over the next five weeks, throughout this season of the church year we call Lent, I invite you to journey with me in growing deeper in these holy habits so that we strengthen our walk with Jesus.

For just as Jesus long ago called fishermen, tax collectors, and even women to follow him,

Jesus calls us today to follow him and to walk with him. As we seek to follow Jesus,

…we are seeking to learn from him, to emulate him, to go where he wants us to go, to do what he wants us to do, and to walk on the journey of life with him.

-Adam Hamilton “The Walk” p.8

When we strengthen our walk with Jesus, we then better respond to God in word and action,

in living for God and living with God.

No matter where we find ourselves today on our walks with Jesus, taking initial first steps,

walking tenderly as we still learn the ways of Jesus, or confidently striving hand in hand with Jesus, we can always strengthen our relationship with Jesus through intentionally grounding ourselves in holy habits for the road ahead.

Today, we begin this journey of walking with Jesus with the most important, foundational holy habit—worship. More specifically, worshiping God Almighty through faith in God’s Son Jesus.

If I were to simply define worship, I would say worship is our response to God.

What are we responding to? God’s own presence. God’s gifts of life, of love, of faith, of salvation, of redemption, of grace, of blessing. Look around you—while there is much that saddens us and confuses us, there is also much for which to give thanks. And when we worship, we are offering our thanks to God.

..The earliest expressions of worship recorded in Scripture involved bringing an offering to God … or sacrificing something from one’s crops or flocks as an expression of gratitude and love for God. Our worship is given ..not to persuade God to bless us, but as an expression of our love for and gratitude to God.

-Adam Hamilton “The Walk” p.20-21

The three Greek words found in the New Testament and translated as worship align with the old English word worth-ship. They all describe honoring another who is greater and worthy of honor and awe. Aa Christians, we believe God is worthy of our honor and our worship.

Yet consider in the greater world around us the many ideals that are worshiped instead of God.

David Foster Wallace declares

…In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.

…

If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

…

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart,

you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

*--David Foster Wallace, 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Speech: This is Water.* -thepastorsworkshop.com:worship adapted

When we gather for our worship services every weekend, we choose to worship Almighty God

who has given the gift of Godself through Jesus, God’s own Son sent to teach and live among us, die on a cross to offer us salvation, and be risen from the dead to offer us new life.

When we worship, we acknowledge God’s glory, majesty, greatness, power, and goodness.

We recognize and honor God as God, while recognizing that we are not God, but the children or creatures of God.

-Adam Hamilton “The Walk” p.21

Every week, we are called together to corporate worship, to worship God together with a community of believers also seeking to learn and to follow God’s Son Jesus.

Consider how many times the word “us” is used in Psalm 95:

O come, let us worship and bow down,  
    let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!  
For he is our God,  
    and we are the people of his pasture,  
    and the sheep of his hand.

O come, let us sing to the Lord;  
    let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
    let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (95: 6-7, 1-2, NRSV)

When we worship together, we respond to God with our love and praise, our prayer and thanksgiving. Whether through quiet or loud noise, through singing or praying, through offering the sacrifice of our finances or the sacrifice of our hearts, worship is our honor given to God,

and thanksgiving for God’s gift of Jesus present in our lives.

The style of our worship is less important than why we worship.

Last weekend, the confirmands who attended the Believe Tour were offered a glimpse into three very different styles of worship.

Believe is based on a modern worship style, with praise songs, lights and video and fog machines and many hands raised in praise. Then on the way home from Believe we stopped to tour and pray at the Covington Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, a large Roman Catholic church with beautiful stained-glass windows, intricate mosaics, kneeling benches, and nuns found in prayer. The quiet reverence of the Basilica was a stark contrast to the high energy of worship in the arena at Believe. Then we returned home to worship here, with our traditional format of worship and the classic hymns mixed with modern praise choruses.

I’ve worshipped in a lot of different churches, with a lot of different styles. While style is a comfort presence, what is most important is the why we worship. Are we gathering simply as a social club, or are we gathering to offer our worship and praise? Are we gathering to confirm our own biases, or gathering to allow the Holy Spirit to empower and change us into who God created and calls us to be?

If we’re honest, there will always be something about the church we won’t like. There will always be part of the worship service that is not our favorite. Yet we are still called to gather together weekly for worship, to respond to God with our thanks and praise, to learn more how to follow Jesus.

For worship at its core is not about us. Worship is about God.

..Imagine celebrating a birthday party for your child. You buy a cake, invite guests, and give her presents. Now imagine discussing the party with your spouse later that night. Your spouse asks you what you thought of the party. You say, “I don’t know. I didn’t really get anything out of it. It didn’t impact me. It didn’t feed me very well. People didn’t bring me presents. We sang happy birthday with a guitar but I’d rather hear it on an organ.” We say these things about worship all the time because we make it primarily about us rather than primarily about God.

*--Submitted by Jason Baxter, Illustration from a lecture given by Dr. Jonathan Powers, Assistant Professor of Worship at Asbury Theological Seminary*

-thepastorsworkshop.com:worship

Worship is not something believers attend. Worship is something we do. We gather not to be entertained, but to respond to God’s love and grace with praise and gratitude, offering ourselves to God and seeking to bless others. The pastors, musicians, and liturgists are not performers on a stage hoping to entertain the congregation. I would encourage you next week to offer up an AMEN rather than applause if the choir number moves you. We are offering ourselves to God to lead us all in authentic worship, seeking to bless God with our gifts

and to be used by God to draw the congregation to offer praise back to God.

-Adam Hamilton “The Walk” -P25 adapted

Worship is the way we say thank you to God each and every week. Worship as a soul recharge is a bonus to assist us on our journeys of faith.

During this season of Lent, I encourage you to make corporate worship a weekly priority,

whether here or elsewhere if you have to travel, as your way to say thanks to God and respond to God’s love with your praise.

In-between the weekends, remember that we are also called to individual worship on a daily basis. And the basis of our daily worship is the holy habit of prayer.

Communal prayer is critical. We are called to pray together for our world and for one another.

Yet individual prayer is foundational, for it builds up our relationship with God each and every day.

I always define prayer simply as conversation with God.

Yet how many of us struggle to be in active conversation with God?

One statistic declared that only

..41% of men and 59% of women report praying at least once a day.

-Adam Hamilton “The Walk” p.34

That is not a great way to grow a relationship, if we never spend time in conversation with God! Prayer grows us our walk with Jesus.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonican church, encourages us to:

Rejoice always

Pray continually

Give thanks in all circumstances

For this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

These words to written to a community of faith where Paul and Silas were beaten and jailed,

yet sang songs of faith while in jail. These words were written to a community struggling to remain faithful amid suffering and doubt.

Rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances—give thanks to God continuously,

not because life is always good, but because of the gift of life and the gift of God’s presence.

Pray continually—we are called to offer up praise and prayer, laments and petitions,

thanksgiving and confession, all throughout our days.

There are many ways for us to engage in private prayer. Don’t get held back by a proper way to pray. Be authentic in whatever you do, and remember your prayers are your conversation with God. Don’t be afraid to pray!

..In the nineteenth-century a Russian peasant wanted so much to be obedient to Paul’s call for uninterrupted prayer that he went from hermit to hermit looking for an answer until he finally found a holy man who taught him the Jesus Prayer. Top of Form

He told the peasant to say thousands of times each day, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” In this way the Jesus prayer

slowly became united with his breathing and heartbeat so that he could travel through Russia … living a life of unceasing prayer.

--[*Henri Nouwen, with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, Spiritual Direction, HarperOne.*](https://amzn.to/38jFPVd) adapted

-thepastorsworkshop.com:prayer

During this season of Lent, I invite you to pick a way to pray and be intentional in your conversation with God.

Spend five more minutes a day in prayer.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Pray using the acronyms TACOS or ACTS.

Pray for our congregation at 7:48 am or pm

Look at your hand—you have five fingers. So pray five times a day over the next week, one for each finger. Pray when you wake up, pray at each meal (more than just for the food), and pray at bedtime.

Pick a new way to pray, and be intentional to worship through prayer. Cultivate a way to pray unceasingly.

Then join together this Wednesday night as we practice our walk with some intentional ways to practice worship and prayer.

As we journey through Lent, this season of the church year that leads us to the praise of Palm Sunday, the agony of Good Friday, and the glory of Easter morning, remember how important worship and prayer was to Jesus. Jesus was a faithful Jew who regularly traveled to Jerusalem

to worship at the Temple, and as a Rabbi was known to regularly worship in the local synagogue.

Prayer was a part of the daily rhythm of Jesus’ life. He would withdraw to pray after ministering to the multitudes and before critical decisions. He would give thanks before he ate. Jesus prayed on mountains and in boats; he prayed for the sick and even for his enemies.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for his disciples to be one and Jesus prayed for God to give him the strength for what was to come.

And even from the cross, Jesus used vital breaths to offer up three prayers:

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Mt 27:46 citing Ps 22:1

Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.

Lk 23:34

Into your hands I commend my spirit.

Lk 23:46

If Jesus can use valuable breath and energy to pray from the cross, we can offer our prayers in all situations. Sometimes our prayers are lament, as sometimes we gather for worship in grief.

Sometimes our prayers are praise, as sometimes worship moves us in meaningful ways.

Sometimes our prayers and worship are simply an act of showing up, to show whose side we are on, to offer God the response of our presence, even in the midst of our messy lives.

No matter what our lives or faith lives are like today, God invites us to worship and to pray,

to respond to God’s presence with our willingness to follow Jesus.

If we remember nothing else today, remember this:

Our worship and our prayer are our way of saying to God “Thank You” and “I love you.”

We are meant to be a living hallelujah, praising God with our words and our lives, offering God our worship and honor, willing to walk with Jesus to learn God’s ways and live as God’s people.

As we continue on in Lent, may we be intentional in our worship, as a community of faith and as individual believers. May we be intentional in our holy habits that deepen our walk with Jesus.

May God guide us on our journey.

Let us pray.