

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.2.2020



## What Is Worship?

The Reverend Pen Peery

1 Kings 19:11-13a

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

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Today we continue our sermon series called *Back to Basics*. We are exploring some of the foundations of the church – who we are, what we do, and why it matters. We've focused on the purpose of the church, the reason we have members, and today our focus is on the most important thing the church does – worship.

My grandmother was the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries – she was born in China in 1909. Her parents took the first Scripture passage we heard – the Ten Commandments – very seriously (and literally) – so for my grandmother – the Sabbath was a day that was set apart for **expressly** for worship, Bible study, and rest.



When my grandmother raised children of her own, she made sure they understood how central keeping the Sabbath was. My father tells the story that on Sunday afternoons – after going to Sunday School, and church, and having lunch with the family – before he could go outside to play my grandmother required him to recite the *Westminster Shorter Catechism of Faith*...which is **only** 107 question and answers long.

The first question is one you may even remember yourself: *What is the chief end of humankind?* **To glorify God and enjoy him forever.** Grandmom believed that – resolutely and completely.

My grandmother died 22 years ago. And to be honest, I am not sure my track record of keeping the Sabbath would pass muster with her (I'm coaching a basketball game in a couple of hours and have plans for a Super Bowl party later tonight...)...and it's my job to be here on Sunday morning!

But regardless of how much the pace of life and the world around us quickens – what I think is undeniably true about who we are as human beings – is that there **is** *something* in us that yearns for worship.

Sure – some of us do it out of habit. I bet there is someone in this room who is here because their parent, or spouse, or friend told them they had to be here. But at some point, and on some level, I think all of us have (or will) bump into the majesty of God in such a way that reminds us that we are in the presence of something amazing – and much, much bigger than ourselves – and that causes us to say (in the words of Anne LaMotte) – “wow” and, “thank you” and, “help me” – even if on occasion.



The second Scripture I am going to read today is part of the story about the prophet Elijah.

It's a time when Elijah has an experience of God in worship. It's just a small part of the story – but what you need to know is that when Elijah encountered God, Elijah was in place where he was anxious, and disillusioned, and weary. He was overwhelmed with life and not sure what his next steps were supposed to be or whether they would make a difference. He had literally run away his responsibilities and hidden in a cave.

It was at the literal end of Elijah's rope when he realized that he was in God's presence.

Listen with me as I read from 1 Kings chapter 19...

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Most of the time, people don't tell you why they come to worship.

I'm not sure I'm in a position to tell you why people come, either, but as a pastor, I can tell you that every time I stand in this pulpit and look out onto these pews I am aware of some of the things that are going on in people's lives.

This morning we (will hear) heard some of our members share the story of their journey with addiction and recovery. What you should know is that we have a lot more people in this congregation who share that story than we had space to tell about it in an hour between services.

You should know that every Sunday in the pews beside and around you are people who are fighting disease – some that are difficult, but okay to talk about – like cancer – and others that are harder to talk about – like depression.



You should know that when we gather for worship there are always people who are struggling with their relationship with God – folks who feel distant, or let-down, or who have questions they don't know how to answer, or who are angry because of the ways things have gone in their lives or the world around them.

You should know that, every week, when we gather, there are people who feel ashamed to be here – who feel inadequate to be around others that they perceive to be more faithful and who have made less, or less grievous mistakes than they have.

You should know that you are in the presence of people who worry – about money, and about the future, and about whether or not this will be the week when they will lose their job.

You should know that there are people in the pews this morning whose relationships with their kids, or whose marriages, are hanging on by a thread.

You should know that there are people here this morning who are numb – and who are so busy trying to stay on the treadmill of life that it's hard for them to stop their minds from racing for the hour that we share together.

There are also people here – every Sunday – who have the good news of the gospel reach them in deep and meaningful ways. In this sanctuary there are people who are surprised by grace, thrilled by hope, and moved to make commitments. There are people who are so full of joy that they just can't wait to get into this room and sing hallelujah.

And – in a lot cases I would guess – if you come here enough times – you might



resemble more than a few of those descriptions...because that's how life ebbs and flows; and that's how faith ebbs and flows, too.

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Worship is an activity – and this sanctuary is a place – that welcomes all of that.

Sometimes we make the mistake in believing that worship – and this sanctuary – are reserved for people who have their life and their faith together. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth.

If we all had our stuff together, why would we need to come into this sanctuary and acknowledge our need for God's grace and mercy?!

For God's provision?!

For God's guidance?!

I mean – there **are** other ways to spend our time.

Think about what you might do with the two or three hours you commit to getting ready and showing up here to learn and to worship. What you might be able to accomplish at work? What you might read? Maybe get some exercise? Maybe some more sleep?

Lots of people make those other choices.

It's no secret that attendance in worship on Sunday morning is different than it used to be. On the one hand, what people consider to be "regular" has changed. The Pew Research Center finds that of those who consider themselves religious, more than half – 56% - attend services "a few times a year." Those who attend worship monthly consider themselves "active." Just over a quarter come to worship almost every week.

It is also no secret that more and more of our neighbors don't consider themselves to be particularly religious. On numerous times in this pulpit over the



past seven and a half years I have mentioned that the fastest growing slice of the religious landscape in our country are those who claim “nothing in particular” when it comes to faith. They’re not atheists, they’re not agnostics – they’re just... *meh*.

And I wonder what my grandmother would say about all of that.

I would assume that she would be *shocked*. And, most likely – initially – *concerned* about what all of that change means. But – knowing her...and her faith in the God not just of yesterday, but of tomorrow – and how unbelievably stubborn she was – my guess she would spend most of her energy doubling-down on how important it is to **practice** worship and Sabbath.

Because in a culture that is falling *out of practice* – the reason to be here is that much more relevant.

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So, I’m with my grandmother: Instead of worrying about people who aren’t here – I would rather focus on the people who are.

And, you know, there is something about this place, isn’t there?  
And about what happens here?

There is something about being in a room where the floor is so old and so well-trodden that the floorboards squeak when you walk on them.

There is something about music – spilling over from an overcrowded choir loft and rising up from the voices of those seated around in the pews – that lifts your gaze and your spirit to a transcendent place.



There is something about being in a room where the rafters soar; where the light is refracted through stained glass.

There is something about being in a place with such memory – the memory of loved ones who have sat and sung and prayed right where you are; the memory of promises made and *clung to*...of baptisms, and weddings, and memorial services that you can still see if you close your eyes; the memory of feelings of being convicted, and inspired, and moved, and challenged by words spoken from this central pulpit.

There is something about being in a place where we gather around a mystery – a God who is **three-in-one** – where we talk about love that pours itself out on a cross – where we find strength in weakness.

There is something about reading and shaping our lives around a **common story** – a story about God and God’s people – a story about God’s faithfulness in the midst of the people’s foolishness – a story about hope and resurrection – a story that is at once ancient as it is breathtakingly relevant and fresh...

because it is true...

and because it is ***still a story*** about **our** lives and **our** world.

Why do we come here?

There are a host of reasons.

But one of the things worship always does – no matter our reason for showing up – is to remind us that these lives we lead and this race the world around us runs is about ***so much more*** than we might allow ourselves to believe, were it only about what we do and how hard we work at doing it.

Worship is a place that expands the world and our reality.



And one of things worship always does – no matter our reason for showing up – is to remind us that **we** are not the only solution to the problems we face – that we **cannot** do this on our own – that we **depend** on the providence and grace and mercy of God for every season of life – and that our dependence is well-founded – and worthy of praise.

One of the things worship does – if we do it the right way – is serve to help us **inhale** – to bring us closer to the source of life – to fill us up with a Spirit that can heal and restore and reset – to get us to the place where we can **exhale** the gifts of that Spirit when we leave this space and this time that is set-apart...so that what we do here can be of benefit for the sake of the world out there that Christ came to save.

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Elijah got to the place where he couldn't hear it – where he couldn't feel it.

The pressure and pace of life –

the expectations he labored under –

the doubt he felt about the future –

all of it kept him from experiencing the presence and  
comfort of God.

And then, beyond the chaos and anxiety of his everyday –

and past the noise of wind and earthquake and fire –

when the swirl of life had finally hushed –

he heard the sound of sheer silence –

and he remembered who he was, and whose he was, and  
what his purpose was –

which gave him strength to walk forward in hope.



We are created – designed – built – to listen for that sheer silence.

To shape our lives in such a way that we can claim that reminder every week in worship.

So – whatever your reason for showing up, and in whatever state of mind – I am glad that you are here.

And I hope you'll keep up the practice.

Not because you **ought** to.

But because I think we **need** to.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

