

Worship—A Sacrifice of Praise.

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
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I want to begin by asking you a simple question. I'm not going to do one of my occasional "person in the pew" interviews, but I want you all to consider how you'd answer this question: "What did you come here expecting to do this morning?" Notice, I'm not asking *why* you came... maybe you're here because a friend brought you, or because you came out of duty, or because you're a member of the church and you always come on Sundays. I'm asking, "What did you come here expecting to *do*?" Think about how you might answer.

When we began our service, the first thing we did was to sing the great old hymn that goes "*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee. Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty, God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.*" That's one hymn everybody can sing – not just us, but all the Protestants and the Catholics too. Everybody knows it. Surveys say it's the most popular hymn in America — #1 on the "Hymn-singers' Top Forty."

After the Old Testament lesson, we stood and recited an ancient canticle—but in modern English. It comes from a little book in the Apocrypha that says it was sung by the three young Hebrews after Nebuchadnezzar threw them into the fiery furnace. "*Glory to you, Lord God of our fathers; you are worthy of praise; glory to you. Glory to you for the radiance of your holy name; we will praise you and highly exalt you forever. ...Glory to you, ...glory to you, ...glory to you.*"

I haven't always been an Episcopalian. Until I went to college I was a Presbyterian, and as was true back in the 50's for all good little Presbyterians, when I turned twelve our pastor expected me to memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism. I'll never forget the first question in that little booklet. It was: "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer was: "*The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*"

"Glory to you, Lord God of our fathers... we will praise you and highly exalt you forever."

When I was twelve, I wondered: How do we "enjoy God forever"? I still wonder about that. —If we're not "enjoying" God now, how do we get started? I think the main reason we're here this morning is to "enjoy God." And that enjoyment begins with *worship*.

When you see a cartoon picture of people with haloes, floating on clouds, wearing long white robes, and playing harps, you know it's supposed to represent heaven. Cartoons are meant to be funny, but – like other kinds of humor – they convey some truth. The reading from Isaiah we heard earlier and the long passage from the Book of Revelation are word-pictures that try to open a window into heaven, where the main activity is not exactly harp-playing, but rather *worship*... which – according to the Book of Psalms – includes not only harp-playing, but organ-playing, and trumpet-playing, bell-ringing, cymbal clanging, hand-clapping, singing, dancing, and shouting. (Sounds like fun, doesn't it? It's probably what those 17th century Presbyterians had in mind when they said we were meant to "enjoy God forever.") —It reminds me of kindergarten, when the music teacher gave all of us kids rattles and drums and noise makers to play with in the "rhythm band." Of course, that was before we got old enough to be very self-conscious. We just made a joyful noise and had a good time.

Maybe we need to remember that Jesus said we had to become like little children if we wanted to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

When Biblical writers tried to convey a vision of heaven, their vision always centered on *worship and praise* being offered to God by angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim, and the white-robed assembly of the redeemed, gathered around the throne of God. So: If we're Christians who believe that heaven is – in some sense – our destiny, then we have to believe that our destiny also must be, as the old Calvinist catechism puts it, "*to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*"

And that *glorifying* and *enjoying* starts here, with the people of God gathered for worship.

Pardon me for getting academic now, but at this point I think we need a definition. So let's think about the *meaning* of worship. "Worship" is short for *worth-ship*. (Stay with me here...) Worship is an activity that acknowledges the worth, value, dignity, or status of something or someone. In the religious sense, every act of real worship reinforces our sense of the ultimate value – the top rank or transcendent worth – of God. In fact, whatever is the focus of my conscious valuing activities – that means what I spend most of my time, imagination, money, and energy on – *that* is my god. Therefore, when the focus of my valuing activities is something *other* than the All-Holy One-in-Three to whom we have been singing and praying here this morning, I am practicing what we can only call *idolatry*. I'm worshipping something that does NOT have ultimate, transcendent worth. I am offering sacrifice to a false god... or maybe a whole pantheon of false gods.

Here's another definition: "A *sacrifice* is a costly gift, joyfully given." Worship must include the *offering of sacrifice* – the glad giving of a precious gift – because that's the only act which can certify the ultimate value that belongs to what I worship (that is, to my God). So... If I say that I believe in the One True God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but I offer God nothing of genuine value to me —like my time, or my intellect, or my money— my claim is invalidated, and I'm shown to be a fraud. My behavior gives the lie to what I say. Instead, it demonstrates that my *real* value-focus is elsewhere. When my most precious offerings are given to something else —like improving my appearance, or getting rich, or acquiring influence over other people, or seeking entertainment and pleasure— then that "something else" is my false god, my "idol."

Worship is something we *do*. It calls for effort and concentration. In America our attitude toward many things has been formed by the experience of being passive spectators —sitting in front of the TV. Authentic worship, though, has to be participatory, not passive. It demands that we be focused, engaged, and active. However, more often than not we come to church looking for somebody to inspire, instruct, or entertain us.

But, you know, worship isn't about *us*. It's about God. It's an offering whereby we confess and reaffirm the worth of God and importance of God for us. Americans revere "the market," and the market says we reveal the value of something to us by how much we're willing to pay for it. Common sense and analogy with the rest of our lives tells us that if we don't put anything *into* something, we're unlikely to get anything *out of* it. We invest ourselves deeply only in things that really matter to us. —If education matters to you, when you were in school you *studied*. If a sport matters to you, you *practice* so you can play well. If your investments matter to you, you take care to *manage your money*. —And if God matters to you, you're *serious* about worship.

We work at what counts to us, and worship calls us to work. It's a sacrificial offering of our mind and imagination and energy to God. —Here's a paradox, though: God is the focus and recipient of our worship, but worship really only benefits *us*. After all, if God is truly God, he doesn't "need" our praises. God has no deficiencies. God isn't like an insecure human being who will "wither" unless we give him lots of "positive strokes." —But our souls will wither if we *don't* worship!

Worship is like giving a special gift to the person we love the most. Don't we always want to give great gifts and do wonderful things for our beloved? Cost or personal effort is no obstacle. Love inspires us to sacrifice.

Do you remember the gospel story of the woman who broke the alabaster bottle of precious perfume and poured it over Jesus' feet? The *only* person who objected to such extravagance, the only person who said, "What a waste!" was Judas Iscariot.

Those who love the Lord are ready to "waste" their time, money, creativity, energy and intellect on him. Our songs of praise, our prayers, our acts of devotion —even something as simple as coming into the church a little early and getting down on our knees is "costly perfume" poured out on the Lord... just because we love him.

There's a void in the human heart that every person alive is trying to fill with something. There's an empty shrine in the center of our souls. That's the place that was made for God, because God made *us* for himself. God intended from the dawn of creation to make his home in our hearts, so we might "enjoy him forever."

Worship opens the door and lets him in.