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“The Gift of Worship”

Psalm 84

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How lovely is your dwelling place,
 O God of hosts!
My soul longs,
 indeed it faints,
for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my flesh sing for joy
 to the living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home
 and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
 at your altars,
O Lord of hosts,
 my King and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house,
 ever singing your praise.
Happy are those whose strength is in you,
 in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
As they go through the valley of Baca,
 they make it a place of springs.
 The early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength.
 The God of gods will be seen in Zion.
O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer.
 Give ear, O God of Jacob!
Behold our shield, O God.
 Look on the face of your anointed.
For a day in your courts is better
 than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper
 in the house of my God

*than live in the tents of wickedness.
For the Lord God is a sun and shield.
God bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

Psalm 84

Conservative estimates are that we are exposed to 250 advertisements per day. Others claim that given the prevalence of social media, the number is more than ten times that figure. One of the ways empires keep control of their citizens is through propaganda. Advertising is the propaganda of the empire of greed.

In the end it is not usually the things we hate that lead to our undoing, but the things we love. Americans love lots of things, mostly things. We know that a new sweater or the latest running shoes will not bring happiness. A new phone or a shiny gadget will not make a lasting difference. New apartment. No. Bigger salary. No. Not for long

Buying things does bring happiness, but for only a moment. It is so temporary. After that, it is back to Amazon. We know things do not provide lasting happiness, but we only know it with our brains. Our hearts are easily seduced.

We look to the higher paying job, another step up the ladder.

We secretly hope the next thing is going to make our lives complete. We do not think our way into consumerism.

We are driven by the greed our culture encourages. The antidote to this materialistic way of thinking is worship.

James Smith writes, “It’s not that singing hymns or hearing sermons inoculates us against our consumeristic desires. Not hardly. It’s that over a lifetime of Sundays we are repeatedly reminded of our purpose in life, what we were made for.”

Worship is the opportunity to find our purpose in choosing God rather than the empire. Think about it this way: “Let’s say I have a flute and I’m using it to roast marshmallows over a campfire. It doesn’t work out so well, for the flute or the s’mores. So, I throw the flute down in frustration. But the problem isn’t the flute. The flute wasn’t made for that purpose.”

Worship reminds us over and over that we were not made for the purpose of looking successful. We worship to learn counter-cultural values. We worship so that when we see commercials, we can say, “That’s a lie. There’s no way that outfit’s going to change my life. I don’t believe it.”

We understand that worship is meant to lead us from empty lives to full lives, but some Sundays, worship feels empty. Sometimes we bring our worst self to worship. We understand 2000 years of tradition is important, but Sunday morning is not always when we are at our most attentive. Some days we are just a step above asleep.

We come out of habit. We come because we think of ourselves as church people. We come to make our mothers happy, even mothers who do not know we are at church. We come to support Plymouth. We want the church to do well and people judge whether churches are doing well by how many people are there on Sunday.

We come because occasionally we learn something—some fact about the Bible, some story about the church, or some little lesson from Christianity. We come because though it is not terribly entertaining, it is free. On our most unengaged Sundays, we get what we pay for.

Christianity Today recently published an opinion piece titled, “All About That Tenor: Why Men Don’t Sing in Worship.” They blame the culture-driven idea of worship as entertainment. For many, worship is more about watching than participating. Some blame it on the media. Some blame it on the influence of business models that turn churches into purveyors of religious services. Some blame it on church leaders who want everyone to be happy.

The sad truth is that worship is an inert experience for most. They come to see worship. They do not come to participate. They have lost the ability to distinguish between a concert and worship, but they are not the same. A concert is a passive experience. Worship is active engagement.

Some just do not get worship. Like some do not get music. Physicians have discovered that musicians’ brains are different—like we needed a study to know that. The corpus callosum which connects the brain’s two hemispheres is bigger in professional musicians. Conversely, some seem wired in a way that does not respond to music.

Ulysses Grant said, “I only know two songs. One is Yankee Doodle and the other is not.”

Celine Dion said, “I don’t like listening to music. I’m not a music fan.”

Celine did not recognize the irony.

Sigmund Freud bragged that he was incapable

of obtaining pleasure from music because he was too analytical to be moved by music.

Explaining to someone what they are missing by not appreciating music is difficult. People who do not love music cannot be argued into loving music. You cannot make a reasonable argument for losing yourself in music.

In a similar way, some do not seem wired for worship. They just do not get it. Something in their soul does not connect.

Some think they are incapable of experiencing worship because they are too analytical. Some think they are too educated to be moved by worship. They are too logical to confess their sins, listen for God's guidance, or open their hearts to the Spirit. Worship is not natural for them, so they want worship to be an advertisement for the church, include cute things people enjoy, or more announcements that make the church look busy. They think worship is less than it is.

At another church, that is not Plymouth, a church different from Plymouth, the nominating committee has a church member with whom they do not know what to do.

"We can't put him on a committee. He makes every meeting too long."

"He doesn't like children, youth, or the elderly."

"He's too greedy for the finance committee."

"Let's make him an usher."

That's what they do. Each Sunday morning, he puts on an outfit fit for a mortician. He stares at visitors as though they are planning to steal hymnals. He hands out orders of worship like he gets a commission on the orders he does not hand out: "Do you need a bulletin? I guess you

can sit wherever you want. The fire exits are in the back.”

That usher is the opposite of the usher in Psalm 84. The usher in the Psalm “would rather be a doorkeeper in God’s house than live in luxury in the fancy tents of wickedness.”

This usher sings as he walks to worship. He longs to be in the sanctuary. He feels like he is going to pass out if he does not get to worship soon. The Valley of Baca, a dry, barren place, is like a rest stop with a lake, because it is on the way to worship.

The sanctuary is the most beautiful room in the world. The sight of the altar warms his heart. He is sure the birds who fly into the sanctuary are blessed. He is envious of the priests who live across the street.

He loves singing the psalms. He loves praying for those who are hurting. He feels surrounded by God’s goodness in worship. The time he spends in worship is better than any other time, because he feels God’s presence in worship.

This usher’s experience makes it into the hymnal, becomes number 84. About twenty of the Psalms are traveling songs sung to pass the time and lift the spirits as worshippers make their way to Jerusalem. Psalm 84 is their version of “a hundred bottles of beer on the wall.”

They sing, “God, what a lovely sanctuary you have. No place is as gorgeous as any place where you are.”

They love worshipping, praying, feasting, dancing, and celebrating. The Israelites sing that one day worshipping God is better than a thousand on the beaches of a Greek Island.

They sing, “O God, we long to worship you.”

In our best moments, we understand. Our longing

to worship leads to sacred moments, when we gather to worship with people we love, when we close our eyes and feel God's grace, when we listen to the silence, when we let ourselves hope, when we are surprised to find we are worshipping God.

In 2007, Tony Cicoria, a 42-year-old surgeon, was struck by lightning. His heart stopped, but he was resuscitated. A few weeks later he was back at work. Everything seemed normal until he started craving classical piano music. His head was filled with music. He bought a piano and started taking lessons. He loved it. He started writing music. He became a successful composer.

He calls getting struck by lightning a lucky strike and the music in his head a blessing. Maybe the music was in him all along. Maybe being a doctor made him feel too smart for music. Maybe the noise of a busy life kept him from hearing the music he needed to hear.

Some Sundays we need the Spirit to strike us like lightning, to shock us into worship. We need the music beyond words. We need to experience forgiveness and love. We need to pray.

Most Sundays at Plymouth, we have five prayers. Each one calls us to genuine worship. The invocation invites us to think about who we are and who we could be. The Lord's Prayer reminds us to pray beyond personal concerns, "Our Father." The prayer of confession humbles us. We list our shortcomings and receive God's forgiveness. The prayer at the end of the children's time reminds us of the simplicity of loving one another. During the prayers of the people, we name those who are hurting. We remember that we are God's family. The offertory prayer invites us to give ourselves as well as our money.

We do not come here to take care of our praying for the week. We pray to become people who pray. We pray to live in the goodness of God, the power of the Spirit, and the Hope bigger than we are. We pray beyond what we imagine.

You plop down onto a new cushion in the same old pew. On this Sunday, the price of coffee is bothering you. The Chai Latte at Joe Coffee is \$5, and if you want peppermint, it is six. Then you hear a prayer that God will remind us of those who are struggling to put food on the table, as well as those who lack a table altogether. That is how we worship. On Sundays, we hear different stories, not the ones coming at us on the airwaves and internet, but stories about a different way of being in the world.

Worship leads to a different life. We need to open our hearts and minds. We need to celebrate with our whole person. We need to give thanks because gratitude makes us better people.

We need to worship because life is hard. Phillips Brooks describes a worshipper as a ship at sea, fighting a storm. The wind is howling. The rigging is about to fall. The waves crash upon the little wooden vessel. The storm looks like a battle between the sea and the ship, but the battle was won or lost long before this scene. The battle was won or lost in the forest when they picked the strongest trees, when the carpenter began to make the strong ribs of the ship, when the seams were caulked so the boat would not leak. The battle on the sea is won on the land when the ship is built.

The battle we wage every day of the week is won when we learn to worship. Worship provides peace when we are in trouble, hope when we are in despair, love when we are feeling left out, and courage when we need to let go of where we are for where we can go.

A.W. Tozer writes, “I can safely say . . . that any man or woman on this earth who is bored and turned off by worship is not ready for (the best life.)”

Today we think about our commitment to worship. We answer questions about how much time we will give to worship, how much we will pray, how much we will listen, how much we will sing, and how much we will give ourselves in worship.

We do this because we need to. Without worship, we forget that God is with us and live in fear. Without worship, our culture pushes us toward self-centeredness. Without worship, we lose our sense of wonder and plod through life with blinders on. We need the life that comes when we worship God.

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