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Why We Worship

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Texts: Revelation 7:9-17; the Sermon on the Mount (A - All Saints)

One of the comments I hear quite often from people who doubt the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life, goes something like this: "Heaven sure sounds like a boring place! What are we going to do for ever and ever and ever and ever...?"

The reading from Revelation gives us the answer: "...I looked," says John, "and there was a great multitude that no one could count...standing before the throne and before the Lamb...[with] all the angels...they fell on their faces...before the throne of God, [they] worship...day and night within [God's] temple...."

John's vision of heaven is a vision of all saints and angels gathered for worship in God's holy presence. What we are going to be doing in heaven—forever—is the very thing we are doing today! Today, and every time we gather as God's people, we join "...angels and archangels, and all the [saints] of heaven..." to do the very thing for which God created us: worship God!

Sounds kind of exciting to me, to see the awesome beauty of God in all its fullness; to look at the unveiled face of Jesus Christ; to touch those precious wounded hands; to inquire in God's holy temple....

But if worship in heaven can be imagined as boring, perhaps it's because of a notion that worship on earth is boring. There is, nowadays, a growing sense that worship is boring, and an increasing pressure, as Marva Dawn writes, "...to turn the worship of God into a matter of personal taste and time, convenience and comfort...."¹ This sense and this pressure make a common theme in our Worship and Mutual Ministry Committee meetings. A Lutheran congregation I heard of, aware of this trend, for several years included this message on the signboard out front: "Church that's not boring!"

Of course, the church ought to reflect the "highest and best" of

human creativity in its worship: in music and language, art and drama, style and presentation. But words like “boring” or “empty”—even words like “exciting” and “uplifting”—may say more about expectations shaped by the endless hunger of consumerism and the unquenchable thirst for entertainment than about the communion with God and the righteousness Jesus preaches in the Sermon on the Mount!

Well, why *do* human beings worship?

Some say worship is a natural impulse, bred deeply within the human soul—so deep, in fact, that worship is more important to becoming fully human than the need to give and receive love. It is true that worship is the most important thing we can do in becoming the people God creates, calls, and promises us to be. But that’s not *why* we worship!

Others say human beings worship because, for all our knowledge, technology, and ability to learn, life remains a mystery far beyond our full understanding. Today we are alive, a hundred years ago we were not. Tomorrow? Who knows? We know for sure we were born; we know—almost as surely—we will die. In between, we live in the presence of the mystery we call “God”; and we believe that in our worship we meet this mysterious God. And, of course, that’s true! Worship *does* put us in touch with God, without whom we have no hope of becoming the people God creates, calls, and promises us to be. Yet however true this is, it is still not why we worship!

A few say worship is our human attempt to persuade God to be nice to us—to bless us with prosperity and security: an abundant harvest, good health, happy marriages, divine protection, victory in war, or anything else our anxious hearts want. It is true that God is deeply and actively concerned with everything going on in our lives and in our world. But even *that’s* not *why* we worship! Our worship makes no difference whatsoever in how God feels about us, or the good God wills for us and promises us. Because, as Marva Dawn writes, “We will always still be helpless sinners caught in our endless inability to be what we should be or to make ourselves better—and God will always be merciful, compassionate, and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and ready to forgive us as we come to him.”²

We do not worship to feel better, to become better, or to make life better—although all of that may *happen* when we worship.

There is only one reason to worship God: “God deserves it!”³ God

is worthy of our time, our energy, our attention. We worship God for one purpose only: to give thanks for "...the love which has created and which sustains us from day to day...and for the hope of the life to come."⁴ All of which we enjoy because of Jesus Christ!

If we worship for other reasons, we worship for the *wrong* reason. If we worship to become the people God creates, calls, and promises us to be, we worship for the wrong reason! If we worship to meet God because we know that apart from God we have no hope of becoming the people God creates, calls, and promises us to be, we worship for the wrong reason. If we worship to receive God's blessings in life, we worship for the wrong reason. If we worship because we need it, or enjoy it, we worship for the wrong reason. If we worship for *any* reason other than to thank God for *who* God is, for *what* God has done, and *promises* to do, our focus is on *ourselves* and the world *we* want, not on God and the world God wants! And when the focus is on *us* we are more easily disappointed, offended, and perhaps even bored by anything less than our vision of perfection.

Now listen! If we worship for the one and only *right* reason, namely, to praise God "...for our creation, preservation, and...the hope of glory,"⁵ then every other benefit of worshipping God comes to us as well: the person God creates, calls, and promises us to be; a right relationship with God, others, and oneself; a life blessed with peace and joy, comfort and strength, purpose and meaning—indeed, everything we imagine the perfection of heaven to be. Worship lifts us out of this world's limits of time and space, and out of the limits of our own self-interest, into the joy of God's eternal presence and into God's purpose for the whole world. "As a result," affirms Marva Dawn, "we shall be changed—not because of anything we do. God, on whom we are centered and to whom we submit, will transform us by his Revelation of himself."⁶ Jesus gives us that very promise, later in the Sermon on the Mount: "Strive *first* for the [communion] of God and his righteousness, and all [the other] things [you need] will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

The only thing worship promises us is a vision of God and the peace and justice of God's communion—a vision comforting to some and disturbing to others, boring to some and exciting to others. Today, and every week, we get a preview of that heavenly vision in our Holy Communion around God's Table, a Table large enough to gather all of

humanity "...from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,..." from every economic class and sexual orientation and political persuasion; a Table around which our brothers and sisters and all the saints of Faith Church—past, present, and future—will join us in singing, "Salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb...Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Notes

¹ Marva J. Dawn. *A Royal "Waste" of Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 8.

² Ibid., p. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ From the "Prayer of the Church," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 52.

⁵ From the "General Thanksgiving," *ibid.*, 49.

⁶ Dawn, 2.