Worship: the source and summit of faith

Philip H. Pfatteicher
WORSHIP: THE SOURCE AND SUMMIT OF FAITH

© Philip H. Pfatteicher

Above the plain of ancient Mesopotamia rises a great mound of bricks—a veritable mountain. It is a pyramid-shape but made in a series of great steps—five in all. On the very top of this immense pyramid is the shrine of the chief deity of that city-state.

Our gaze is lifted up to that high shrine, far above us, soaring in the sky. Our eye after a time descends the stairs on that mud brick mountain, and at the base we see another shrine, like the one on the top of the pyramid but much smaller.

We ponder the meaning of the mountain with its two shrines, and then we understand. The mountain is like the world. The large shrine at the summit is reflected in the small shrine below. Such is the relationship between heaven and earth. The real home of the gods is in the sky, beyond the vault of heaven far above us, and the shrines and temples we build here are but tiny, puny imitations of the true palace of the deity.

More than that, the mountain is made of a series of great steps—far too large to serve any human use but to serve rather as a staircase for the god to come down from the shrine above to visit the people below. (And to return to the home above when the visit is finished.)

We have testimony to the impressive size of these mountains. Some say it was such ziggurats (for so they were called) which so impressed early Hebrew nomads in their wanderings that when they told the story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) they had such a mountain in mind. The settlers on the plain in the land of Shinar said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for
ourselves . . .” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built (a derogatory description: the builders were not simply mortals but the children of mortals). So the Lord scattered them abroad, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (The name “Babel” seems to have meant “gate of God”).

The ziggurat image therefore became the evidence of human pride, a Promethian effort for fame and security.

The huge building, raised to establish a bond with the power upon which the city depended, proclaimed not only the ineffable majesty of the gods but also the might of the community which had been capable of such an effort. The great temples were witnesses to piety, but also objects of civic pride. Built to ensure divine protection for the city, they also enhanced the significance of citizenship. Outlasting the generation of their builders, they were true monuments of the cities’ greatness.1

Thus, in the biblical story of the tower of Babel, we are warned against idolatry and pride, which some say was and remains the original sin. And it is useful to bear in mind.

There is another memorable biblical image which deals with similar understandings of God’s relationship to the earth but without the mountain. It is Jacob’s ladder. The fugitive Jacob, who had just stolen the blessing his father had reserved for the elder brother Esau, was on the run. He came to “a certain place” which in the morning he was to name Bethel, house of God. It was an ancient holy place, but at this time apparently uninhabited. (According to an old belief, oracles could be received by sleeping in a holy place, as in the call of the boy Samuel as he slept in the temple.) As Jacob slept, he dreamed of a ladder, or as E.A. Speiser calls it in his commentary on Genesis in the Anchor Bible, a staircase, since angels (or at least people) cannot pass one another conveniently on a ladder. This staircase was “set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it!” Thus aware of the communication and commerce between heaven and earth, Jacob saw a visible connection appear between them; separation was temporarily overcome. The Lord stood above the stairs and addressed Jacob.

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendents; and your descendents shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you shall all the families of the earth bless themselves.

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land . . . (Genesis 28:13-15)

Jacob got up early in the morning after that vision, took the stone which had been under his head and set it up as a memorial pillar, anointed it with oil, and gave the

place a name: Bethel, house of God. He exclaimed, in words that have echoed down through the centuries,

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

And so at last we have come to the text of this address. The words of a fugitive thief who found in the wilderness a place filled with the presence of God. The desert was not deserted, and there he discovered a gate through which God came to him and a gate by which he could enter the presence of the God of Abraham and Isaac.

I.

This story of Jacob’s dream is congenial to Lutherans. It tells of a sinner, one who is clearly unworthy of God’s attention, surely undeserving of his care. It begins with a sinner caught in his sin, unable, unwilling to escape. The story, secondly, tells of God coming to that undeserving sinner out of pure, free, unmerited grace—solely because God wants to. God comes to give the sinner the gift of his divine promise. There is no bargain, no contract here, no “If you will serve me, I will be good to you.” The Holy One of Israel says to the sinner, “I am the Lord . . . I am with you and will keep you . . .” That is grace—God’s undeserved, unexpected favor to one who does not deserve it, who deserves only condemnation and destruction.

In terms of the ladder: first God comes down, and then the movement goes upward. “We love him because he first loved us,” the New Testament says, and it is the same theme. That’s the order which evangelicals insist upon: God comes first, and we respond.

Jacob’s response is cautious, befitting a thief, one who knows from his own life that people cannot be trusted. Not wanting himself to be deceived, he offers God a test: If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my Father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee.

(That’s not as generous as it may sound: one tenth for God, nine tenths for Jacob.) Jacob acts here as if he is controlling the situation, even to the extent of suggesting a kind of bribe of God, but the story makes it clear that God has already spoken and acted and the outcome of the matter is settled. God can wait for Jacob.

So this story is the reverse of Babel and of the Mesopotamian ziggurat. In Mesopotamia mortals had built great mountains by which God could come down. They built a staircase for God. (So did the Maya in Central America). More daringly, at Babel children of mortals in their pride began to build their great tower so that they could climb up to heaven. “Bab-el” means “gate of god” and the people there wanted to construct their own gate by which they could enter God’s presence. They wanted to cut their own door in the heavens and look in upon God. Set against that gate of God on the plain of Shinar, Bethel, called by Jacob “the gate of heaven,” is a holy place because there God came down, not because people asked him to but because he chose to come.

Thus the ladder or the staircase is a useful and instructive symbol of God’s interaction with his people. He sets up the ladder. He builds the stairs. He comes down
bearing a child, so that we his children may come up. He descends first to us in order to help us ascend. (See 2 Peter 1:3-4.) In that overwhelming conception of Athanasius, so dear to the Eastern Orthodox churches, “God was made man, so that man might be made God.” (More literally, but slightly less forcefully, “He was humanized that we might be deified.” (On the Incarnation, 54)

It is a sacramental sign: God condescends to come down to bestow his gifts, and one of these gifts is to raise us by the very means he used to come down to us. In the words of Jesus, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

Worship—the Holy Communion most of all—is God’s way of descending to us. He comes to speak to us in the proclamation of the Scripture and in the sermon. He comes to feed us in the celebration of the holy meal. In that dazzling vision of the ancient liturgy of St. James, which we have as hymn 198 (LBW), we find the hushed stanzas:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descending
Comes our homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture,
In the body and the blood,
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way;
As the Light of light, descending
From the realms of endless day,
Comes, the powers of hell to vanquish,
As the darkness clears away.

As his feet the six-winged seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
“Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”

In that most holy sacrament we find the gate of heaven by which Christ our God descends to earth and by which we are able to enter the presence of him: before whom the cherubim veil their faces. Worship, especially eucharistic worship, is God’s way of descending to us with “blessing in his hand.” Worship is Divine Service, Got-
Worship: The Source and Summit

tesdienst, first of all in the sense of God’s service to us. It is God’s coming to serve us with his gifts.

Worship is thus the source of the Faith, for worship—especially eucharistic worship, but all worship—sets before us God’s mighty acts on our behalf. But it is more than a lesson or a review or a reminder. And a church is more than a classroom. For in worship God is active, he does things, he acts; he reaches out and gives us his gifts of life and salvation. He puts his claim on us, and while we pray he comes to us to teach us and to show us and to transform us and to strengthen us.

II.

So worship is also the summit of Faith. It is the place from which our salvation comes, and it is the place to which our salvation lifts us. God comes to give us faith, and our faith leads us back to him. God comes to rescue us and to lift us to himself. The staircase which descends to us from his dwelling place also ascends to him from this world. God comes through the gate of heaven, and he leads us back through it to him.

Worship, therefore, is Divine Service in a double sense. It is God’s service of us, and it is our service of God, in response to his initiative. Worship is our response to what God has done. It begins with his service to us and it continues with our response to him. It is the honour and adoration we pay to him for what he has done for us.

Through the centuries the Christian Church has maintained that although God comes to us in many ways, the place that he has chosen to meet us most fully is in the fellowship of faith, that is, in the church, the congregation of believers. He comes to us not individually and alone, but to us as members of the fellowship of his body, the Church. The social dimension of our encounter with him is important, although it is often ignored. God meets us through other people and with other people. Privatized religion, as if all that mattered was “me and God,” is excluded. We experience the Gospel in and through other people. Should the Gospel come to us when we are alone, it drives us to seek the company of others so that we might share the good news. (The woman in Jesus’ parable who found the lost coin called in her neighbors to rejoice with her.) The evangelical faith leads us always out of ourselves toward God and toward other people. It leads us from our selfish pride to God’s prior grace. It leads us from our self-centeredness to the company of believers. It leads us from private religious experience to the fellowship of faith. It leads us from our own interests to the service of others. From ourselves to God; from ourselves to the Church; from ourselves to the neighbor in need: that is the movement of the evangelical faith.

There is still more, and worship reminds us of all that is happening here. We are saved not alone but with others. We are saved not out of the world but with the world. We are not lifted up and taken away from all this, for we are part of all this. We are not separate from the natural world; we are part of it and it is by that natural world that God raises us: by water and by bread and wine. We dare not despise or ignore that natural world, because God does not despise it or ignore it. He made it, he preserves it, and he is redeeming it.

So the good news of redemption is for us and for all creation. Romans 8 is the classic text:

The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to
decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit . . . (Rom. 8:19-23)

When our first parents sinned, all creation fell. Everything was distorted. Man and woman were no longer equals, but instead a hierarchy emerged in which the man was to rule the woman who would enjoy it; the relation between humans and animals was corrupted and the serpent became the venomous enemy; childbearing became a burden; the relation between the man and the soil was destroyed: “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life”; and humans became mortal: “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” When we fell into rebellion and death we took all creation with us into decay and destruction. When Christ’s work was accomplished, all creation was redeemed. As the sixth century hymn by Fortunatus puts it (I’m sorry that we do not have this stanza in the Lutheran Book of Worship):

He endured the nails, the spitting,  
Vinegar, and spear, and reed;  
From that holy body broken  
Blood and water forth proceed:  
Earth, and stars, and sky, and ocean,  
By that flood from stain are freed.  
(The Hymnal 1940 #66)

In the Revelation of St. John the Divine, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1).

In our service of worship, therefore, we see beyond the immediate assembly. We see others, not yet of this fold (John 10:16), joining in the praise of God. By that vision we are driven so to purify what we do that these others will want to come in.

We join our songs with the praise offered by all creation—the cycle of night followed by day, the return of the seasons, the voices of the birds, the splendor of the flowers and trees, the sweep of the wind, the song of the rivers and sea. You know, I hope, that marvelous canticle (#18) the Benedicite, omnia opera, which invites all the creatures of nature to bless the Lord.

All you works of the Lord, bless the Lord—  
praise him and magnify him forever.

You angels of the Lord, bless the Lord;  
you heavens, bless the Lord;  
all you powers of the Lord, bless the Lord—  
praise him and magnify him forever.

You sun and moon, bless the Lord;  
you stars of heaven, bless the Lord;  
you showers and dew, bless the Lord—  
praise him and magnify him forever.

You winds of God, bless the Lord;  
you fire and heat, bless the Lord;
you winter and summer, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

You dews and frost, bless the Lord;
you frost and cold, bless the Lord;
you ice and snow, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

You nights and days, bless the Lord;
you light and darkness, bless the Lord;
you lightnings and clouds, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

Let the earth bless the Lord:
you mountains and hills, bless the Lord;
all you green things that grow on the earth, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

You wells and springs, bless the Lord;
you rivers and seas, bless the Lord;
you whales and all who move in the waters, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

All you birds of the air, bless the Lord;
all you beasts and cattle, bless the Lord;
all you children of mortals, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

You people of God, bless the Lord;
you priests of the Lord, bless the Lord;
you servants of the Lord, bless the Lord—
praise him and magnify him forever.

You spirits and souls of the righteous, bless the Lord;
you pure and humble of heart, bless the Lord;
let us bless the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit—
praise him and magnify him forever.

We see beyond the bounds of earth to the Church triumphant, and we join the
angels and all the company of heaven in their praise.

All this is a chief purpose of the Daily Prayer of the Church: to give voice to the
praise of creation and to join our songs with the songs of the whole company of
heaven. We join with the natural world, seen and unseen, and with the saints and
angels. We do not go our own way in isolation, insulated from everyone and
everything around us. Daily Prayer is to put us in touch with what is happening
around us, to expand our vision and awareness, to make us more consciously part of
a grand chorus of praise. Daily Prayer is to lift us out of our selfish concerns to a
grander view of the purpose and work of God, to let God work in us as he wills. As we offer our praise and prayer, we glimpse the conclusion to which all of our struggle is tending, and our strength revives and our resolve is renewed.

Here is a statement about the meaning and purpose of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Daily Prayer of the Church, which several of us in the North American Academy of Liturgy worked out:

The mystery of God in Christ
is the center of the liturgy of the Church.

By celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours
at certain times of the day
which recall creation and re-creation
the Church,
gathered together in the Holy Spirit,
hears the life-giving Word of God
and in response to it
voices the praise of creation,
joins with the songs of heaven,
shares in Christ's perpetual intercession for the world.

This cycle of praise and prayer
transforms our experience of time,
deepening our understanding of
how day and night can proclaim and celebrate the Paschal Mystery.

Thus,
the daily Liturgy of the Hours
supplements and contrasts with
the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist
in the life of the Church,
edifying the one holy people of God
until all is fulfilled in the kingdom of heaven.²

With the Holy Communion and the Daily Prayer of the Church you have all you need to know about Christianity. All the essentials are there to be pondered, explored, and acted upon.

III.

Together, the source of faith and the summit of faith form a great mountain from which our help comes and to which our life is directed. This mountain, the source and summit which governs our lives, is "the place of the name of the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 18:7). For much of the Old Testament, the God of Israel lived on a mountain.

---

His city Jerusalem was built on the mountain called Zion, that mystical and magic place.

  The Lord has chosen Zion;
  he has desired for her his habitation. (Psalm 132:14)

The Lord of hosts “dwells on Mount Zion” (Isaiah 8:18); that is where he is to be found:

  You are to be praised, O God, in Zion;
  to you shall vows be performed in Jerusalem. (Ps. 65:1)

That site became the beloved center of faith and the inexhaustible source of hope.

  Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, 
  for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 12:6)

  On the holy mountain stands the city he has founded; 
  the Lord loves the gates of Zion 
  more than all the dwellings of Jacob. 
  Glorious things are spoken of you, 
  O city of our God. (Ps. 87:1-2)

The holy mountain was where the Messiah was enthroned:

  I myself have set my king 
  upon my holy hill of Zion. (Ps. 2:6)

It was therefore a place of promise.

  So you shall know that I am the Lord your God 
  who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. 
  And Jerusalem shall be holy 
  and strangers shall never again pass through it. (Joel 3:17)

Mount Zion and her daughter Jerusalem became the place from which, in later generations, deliverance would come.

  I will put my salvation in Zion, 
  for Israel is my glory. (Isaiah 46:13)

Get you up to high mountain, 
O Zion, herald of good tidings; 
lift up your voice with strength, 
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, 
lift it up, fear not;
Say to the cities of Judah,  
"Behold your God." (Isaiah 40:9)

For the Lord will build up Zion,  
and his glory will appear.  
The Lord shall reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. (Psalm 146:9)

Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. (Revelation 14:1)

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

Mount Zion was a place of faith and promise and hope. That central mountain gave focus to devotion. It was the navel of the world, the center of the universe.  
Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised;  
in the city of our God is his holy hill.  
Beautiful and lofty, the joy of all the earth,  
is the hill of Zion,  
the very center of the world and the city  
of the great King. (Psalm 48:1-2)
Everything else radiated from Mount Zion, and everything converged toward it.

Our attention needs to be fixed somewhere if we are to make sense of the world. Our eye needs an object around which to organize what we see. Some of you may know the poem by Wallace Stevens called “The Anecdote of the Jar.”

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovelly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a part in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was grey and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.3

That is not an especially easy poem and reactions to it vary. But the point is that even
an ordinary jar placed on a hill in Tennessee gave order to the “slovenly wilderness”
and organized it so the wilderness rose up to the jar and sprawled lazily around, “no
longer wild.” A grey and bare jar tamed and ordered the wildness of nature, taking
dominion everywhere. It became the center of that world.

All of us need such a center to make experience intelligible. Devotion too needs
such a focus to give center and coherence. Worship gives that center and that
coherence to our lives. For ancient Israel, the mountain of God gave that focus, and
by metaphorical extension it gives focus to our devotion still.

Talking about the religious importance of mountains at a conference in Canada,
surely one must refer to hymn 445:

Unto the hills around do I lift up
My longing eyes;
Oh, whence for me shall my salvation come,
From whence arise?
From God the Lord doth come my certain aid,
From God the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.

Of all the hills, only one is the source of our strength: Mount Zion, the city of the liv-
ing God. So, at least in past generations, one of the most popular titles for our chur-
ches was “Zion.” It is an enormously rich and suggestive name, which we would do
well to explore continually. The name invites us to

Make the circuit of Zion;
walk round about her;
count the number of her towers.

Consider well her bulwarks;
examine her strongholds;
that you may tell those who come after. (Psalm 48:11-12)

Is there an example of that central mountain which is both source and summit,
origin and goal for us, which orders all experience and gives it form and meaning?
Consider that paradigm of all that we are and believe—the Easter Vigil. In that grand
and powerful celebration we have the essence of Christianity set before us, as on that
most holy night we pass from death to life. That ancient celebration joins Good Fri-
day and Holy Saturday and Easter into one action. The passion, death and resurrec-
tion of Christ are all here. So is our dying and rising in Holy Baptism and its yearly
and daily renewal.

We begin in a darkened church, and there we watch creation take place: fire is
struck and light comes into the darkness and spreads through the room. Out of the

darkness, slowly, one by one, faces and walls and decorations emerge as if for the first time. We listen to the powerful and evocative Easter Proclamation that

This is the night in which,
in ancient times,
you delivered our forebears,
the children of Israel,
from the land of Egypt;
and led them, dry-shod,
through the Red Sea.

This, indeed, is the night
in which the darkness of sin
has been purged away
by the rising brightness.

This is the night
in which all who believe in Christ
are rescued from evil
and the gloom of sin,
are renewed in grace,
and are restored to holiness.

This is the night in which,
breaking the chains of death,
Christ arises from hell in triumph.4

The service of light ended, we sit for the readings which lead to the service and renewal of baptism. We hear again the record of creation and the mighty deliverance of our forebears at the Red Sea as they passed through water from slavery and death to freedom and life. We hear of washing and renewal and our obligation to respond with a renewed life of commitment.

We gather around the font, baptize new Christians and renew our own baptismal vows made long before but which still hold us and support us and strengthen us.

We return to the altar for the celebration of the Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of the Meal. We hear the record of Jesus' resurrection and we experience it—taste it—in the Holy Communion.

The source and the summit of our faith is there in a dramatic way: darkness to light, slavery to freedom, death to life, sorrow to joy, defeat to victory.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain that covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe

away all tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take
away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 25:6-9)
The Great Vigil of Easter is the model for everything else we do in worship. It is quite
simply The Service. Every Sunday is a little Easter, a somewhat less elaborate
celebration of the resurrection on the first day of the week.
Every day, from sundown to sunrise, is a renewal of that movement from darkness
to light as even the cycle of night and day tells of death and resurrection in all their
richness and meaning.
We return once again to the mountain with which we began, and we listen to Isaiah
(and Micah) telling of the grand vision:
   It shall come to pass in the latter days
   that the mountain of the house of the Lord
   shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
      and shall be raised above the hills;
   and all the nations shall flow to it,
      and many peoples shall come, and say:
         “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
            to the house of the God of Jacob;
            that he may teach us his ways
            and that we may walk in his paths.”
   For out of Zion shall go forth the law
          and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2-3)
Echoing such Old Testament visions, Jesus promised,
   Many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac,
      and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 8:11)
There is a great stirring in all creation, and we begin to pulse with excitement. The
word of the Lord has gone forth from that mountain. Even now it is doing its work in
the world, stinging consciences, prodding spirits, moving bodies, gathering the na-
tions. The nations are streaming up the mountain to worship God there, and on the
mountain a meal is being made ready.
That messianic meal on the mountain of God is being prepared by him who is both
the source and the summit of our worship here on earth and in the kingdom to come.