

# Worship as Rendezvous

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**M**y earliest memory is a spiritual one. The memory concerns the death of my grandmother when I was three years old. My grandmother was a fine old southern lady who had for the three years of my life been grieving the loss of her husband, my grandfather. There was never a moment

when that grief was not close to her. When my grandfather died, my family moved into the ancestral home with my grandmother both from love and necessity. After I was born, she seemed to experience a new spurt of life and energy. Each morning she was served break-

fast in bed and I was rolled in a stroller to sit next to her as she ate. I do not remember this, but there is something in me, when the story is told at family dinners or around the fire at Christmastime, that knows that this

is true—and my spirit can even see it a little.

My grandmother was diabetic and even with a new burst of life in her, she was not strong and not long for life on this earth. When she died, the visitation and funeral were held at home, as was often the case in those days in small southern towns. The front parlor was transformed into a kind of worship space, and neighbors and friends gathered for the wild ride of solemn worship and gay remembering. The decision was made between my parents that I was too young to stay and be a part of the funeral and the wake. So I was sent across the street to a cousin's house to play with his new electric train.

This is when my memory emerges. I remember walking across the street with a teenager, but I don't know who—maybe a cousin, maybe a baby-sitter; I don't know. I remember stopping for a moment after crossing the street, under an oak tree, and looking back at the house. Our house was an old southern house,

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not exactly Tara, but a house built in the style called “Gulf Coast Cottage.” It was built in the 1860s with tall white columns, a broad front porch, and wide Alabama heart pine floors. As I turned to look at the house, I saw all the mourners gathering for the service. The men and women wore dark suits; the women’s were nipped at the waist and had peplums. They wore white gloves, and many wore hats. The community was gathering for worship.

As I looked at those people gathering, moving up the walk hand in hand, I noticed that all around the house there was a bright golden aura. Age and life and a good Reformed education prevent me from seeing things like that anymore, but then I saw without question. The aura was like spiky golden flames, like the crown on the Statue of Liberty, and I knew—without any doubt—that aura was God. God was gathering the community for worship. God was surrounding the house, enfolding the people, embracing my grandmother, and it was a beautiful sight to behold. Worship is the mystery of God’s enfolding love and human beings’ marvelous need.

Worship at its core is as mysterious as love. That makes sense if you think about it because that is essentially what worship is—a love story lived out. Worship as rendezvous is where our holy longing meets the Holy’s longing for us. Sometimes that meeting is quiet, understated, filled with distractions, even disappointments and resentments. Sometimes the meeting is fresh with new insights about the Other and about ourselves.

Sometimes it is a roaring passion that slips, in an ever-so-Reformed way, as a tiny tear flicked surreptitiously from the corner of the eye. Sometimes it is a joyful meeting; sometimes a halting one. Sometimes there is a cool distance, an empty, unexpectant duty-bound waiting. Sometimes there is a closeness that rocks the soul.

So how do we write words about worship when the only word is Word and that Word can never be corralled but roams free, loving and tending, shaking and quaking in our casual, often superficial lives? Worship. I’ll admit that I don’t know how to write about it, and often don’t know how to do it either.

Still, I have noticed a few things over the years. First of all, liturgy does not make worship. It supports it and leads it, like rails for a train.

But liturgy, no matter how fine or how faulty, does not make worship. Neither does preaching make worship. Preaching calls us into deeper being, an important prerequisite for real worship, but in and of itself, it is at best good teaching and, at worst, mere distraction. Nor, I would submit, do music or architecture or tradition make worship. Those things may touch the memories or spark the longings, but they are only tools, sometimes useful, sometimes not.

The longer I live and work in ministry, the more clearly I see that worship is not what we do when we gather; it is who we are when we

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gather. Worship is the living out of our love and gratitude for God. It is the telling and retelling, living and reliving, gathering and dispersing, filling and refilling of the deep reservoirs of our relationship to God in Christ. And really, it is only the externals, the preparing of the environment, over which we have any control at all. Worship is the work of the Spirit that draws us in and changes everything.

The vitality of worship is the Spirit's gift to us. It is always available but not always recognized or embraced. In part, I think, that is because we don't know what to look for. But also, in part, it is because the Holy Spirit comes to us as the Spirit of Truth, the One who will remind us of all things that Jesus has told us. Often we stumble into worship on broken legs, having made what feels like a Herculean effort to be there and to do the "right thing" in the presence of the many things that tug away at us. We are not looking for truth. Peace is what we are looking for, or comfort, or ratification of our needs, plans, desires, righteousness—vis-à-vis any given situation of conflict, loss, or insecurity. Truth, however, is not bound by our desire to feel better. Truth is only bound by the desire for what will actually make us better. All that is by way of saying that worship is Spirit work and can be missed or rejected when we are afraid to grow and change, afraid to let go, afraid to take on, afraid to trust God or each other.

But we are not always afraid. And in those moments when grace triumphs over our fears, worship truly happens within us and among us. It seems to me that worship happens in many arenas. It unfolds or blossoms in relationship over time as much as it unfolds within discreet borders, a call to worship and a benediction and sixty minutes in between.

Worship is a rendezvous of our minds with the Beloved. In worship we learn of God, of God's nature, God's activity, our history. As with any relationship, the relationship deepens as we share, again and again, our story together. Remember the time we made the red velvet cake with green food coloring? Remember the time we got lost in Macy's? Remember the time Aunt Weezie was in the hospital and we all gathered to pray? Remember? In worship our minds are called to new learning and also to new commitment. Yes. This God. This God who spoke creation into being, who chose a people for the blessing of the earth, who spoke through prophets, who came in flesh, who died to keep us close. This is my God. And I belong to this God. The more we gather around our stories, the more we gather in the presence of the Great Lover, the more we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, the more all of that takes place, the more deeply we worship.

Worship is also a rendezvous of the heart. In worship we open our hearts to God and accept the awesome embrace of the One who really knows us. By *heart*, I do not simply mean our emotions but also our will

and capacity to choose. Still emotions sometimes get short shrift in our worship, don't they? We are so afraid of manipulating emotions or of emotionalism that we often shy away from the true passion that lies between God and God's people. From beginning to end our story is a love story, a love story written large upon the pages of human history. Worship must find honest and respectful ways to touch on that passion and open our hearts to its healing power, or we will never touch our own or the communities' deep need.

Many of us come to worship with deep need. Many are lonely or lost or confused or guilt ridden. Many are all of those things and do not even know it. Many come looking for a blessing in the midst of lives that seem filled with curse. We have wounds that need healing. We have sins that need forgiving. We have desires that need reshaping. We have disappointments that need mourning. We have love that needs awakening. We have calls that need answering and courage that needs strengthening. In worship, when we are courageous enough, we walk into the sanctuary together, sit side by side, and little by little allow the thick walls and hard shells that hide our needs to be taken down, one small step at a time.

When worship touches the heart of our need with the power of God's grace, then we begin to trust, not just in God, but also in the community of faith into which God has called us. The rendezvous of the heart results, slowly but surely, in the deepening trust and intimacy of those who wor-

ship together. Recently a Swiss Reformed pastor visited our church and I mentioned that I would be preparing this article. I also told him that I was struggling with what to write, that I felt completely blocked. After worshiping with us, on the Sunday that we said goodbye to our beloved church educator with the congregation laying on hands and praying for her in the next stage of her journey with God, he said, "Genie, what makes worship vital in your church is that you and your people trust each other. You know that you can pray together. You know that there is a closeness. When people come to your church, they quickly learn that this is a place where people may share the Spirit together. It is not so hard. Just write that." Worship is a rendezvous of the heart out of which trust grows.

Worship is also a rendezvous of the body with a God who chose to be incarnate. Worship is, and I would submit, must be an intensely sensual experience. In worship we are surrounded by color and sound, by the smell of flowers and candle wax, by the creak of floors and chairs, by the heady perfume of those around us, by the clank of change in an offering plate, by the colors of the seasons, the soft drape of robes on pastors and choir. In worship we are lifted on the sweet soprano sounds of our friends singing and carried by the marvelous basses. In worship we are swept by the music that has shaped

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faith for centuries and challenged by the music of today and tomorrow. In worship we smell fresh bread and sweet lilies. In worship we taste the wine and we splash in the waters. Worship reminds us that we are not disembodied spirits, hoping only to somehow make it through this physical life sufficiently unscathed to enter into the next. We are creatures, made of the earth, filled with wonder, beings in which God delights, beings created to live life responsibly and joyfully and fully. All of the senses are engaged in this kind of worship.

When that happens, we become more and more aware of how God is vitally engaged in every moment and every aspect of our daily lives. God is present, loving in ways physical as well as spiritual.

Worship is also the rendezvous of the community. Worship happens when we are together. Of course there is an intensely personal and transformational aspect to worship, but for Reformed Christians there is no complete worship apart from the gathered people. Worship takes place in submission to one another. We submit to a common time for service, whether or not it is the most convenient for us. We submit to sharing of musical tastes, to the concerns of others, to the needs of the community. When we worship as community, we

become not only a transformed people but also a transformative people. As God molds us in worship into the body God desires us to be, God also issues to us the particular calling of our community. As we worship together God makes us instruments for the blessing of the world, for the embodying of the kingdom's values, for the speaking of the Truth in the world in which we live.

Worshiping in community is risky business. When we isolate ourselves from community, it is far too easy to fall into shallow self-deception. It is not hard to do that when we are together. But it is harder. When we worship together we must learn the spiritual discipline of waiting on another, of waiting for God's timing, of facing fear, of forgiving and giving, of carrying and being carried. Worshiping in community means that we will be changed and that our hearts will often break. Worshiping in community means that we will rejoice with one another and mourn with one another. It means that together we will walk with Christ the salvation story from miraculous birth to cross to resurrection and beyond, year after year after year after year. Worshiping in community means that we must learn to accept that our personal needs are not always ultimate, but neither are they insignificant. Worshiping in community protects us from our worst selves and makes room in our hearts for humility and patience.

Well, that is long on description and short on prescription. How does

worship happen? What is a worship team to do? What turns a gathered body into a vital, worshipping people? Only a couple of things occur to me. First, for worship to be vital people must claim the biblical story as their own story. It must be unlocked for them as a treasured family album that shows them who they are and helps them understand what that means. They must be claimed by the God of that incredible story as surely and concretely as was old Abraham, or the fair-haired David, or the precious young Mary. For worship to be vital, people must see their place in the story as it is told and as it continues to be lived.

Second, for worship to be vital, people must claim it as their own work, not just the job of the paid professionals. Nothing helps with this more than making sure that the people know how to, and in actual fact do, pray. Otherwise, each time of worship will be like an awkward first date, wondering who this one is, whether he or she is trustworthy, if there is any future for the two of you. Simple, honest, nonjudgmental, daily prayer draws us into the relationship with God a little more deeply each day. It builds in us the deep desire for worship together as a community. Praying people cannot bear not to worship together any more than lovers can bear to be separated from each other for very long. Worship is the life's blood of the praying life.

Third, for worship to be vital, it must include not only the Word

preached but also the Word enacted in the sacraments. Regular and frequent reception of the Lord's Supper is as necessary to the life of the Spirit as eating is to the life of the body. In the sacrament, our intimacy with Christ grows even apart from our understanding or our control. When we draw near to Christ in the sacrament, we find ourselves becoming mysteriously more and more the body of Christ in the world and for each other. In worship this transformation happens on a deep level in individuals and in the congregation as a whole. Regular and frequent reception of the sacrament also opens our eyes to the other "sacramental" moments in worship and in all of life, those moments that are mysterious expressions of the truth of God's loving grace.

Finally, for worship to be vital it must be noncoercive and nonmanipulative. Worship is not about getting us to do right theology, although right theology is essential. Worship is not about getting us all on the same page with regard to the issues of the day. Worship is not about rallying the troops or rooting for the home team. Worship is not about making sure that we all behave properly or that we are held accountable when we do not. Worship is not about doing our duty or growing our church or earning a star in our

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crown. Worship is about offering ourselves to God. It is about waiting for God. It is about trusting God. It is about living with God. It is about orienting life toward God.

So how do we do this? I do not know. But, thanks be to God, it has been my experience that when we turn to God in honest longing for deep and

meaningful encounter (as opposed to the frantic desire for success and/or relevance), then God meets us in our striving and, as is so like God, does almost all of the work. ■

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