

**Songs of the Heart:
WELCOME TO WORSHIP!**

Psalm 100

*We worship because of who God is, what God has done,
and who we are.*

A sermon preached by
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I want to welcome you to worship. By that I mean I want you to feel welcome to worship in this place. I want to invite you to inhabit the courts of praise.

When I was in seminary, I took a course called “Introduction to Worship.” It was a required course, or I might not have taken it. I had been worshipping all my life. I grew up in the United Methodist Church. Surely I was qualified for an advanced study. But what I discovered in that course was a lot more to worship than I ever imagined: the history of worship, the theology of worship, the diversity of worship across different times, places, and cultures.

By the time I came out of seminary, I was trained for worship. I was ready to reclaim the Anglican Methodist tradition of the 18th-century Wesleys and lead the liturgical renewal of the United Methodist Church in the 20th century. Then I encountered a culture in which the ancient liturgy was largely irrelevant. Television preachers, non-denominational mega-churches, something called contemporary worship—they didn’t teach us about that in seminary. We began to talk about making worship “culturally relevant.”

So for over 30 years, I have watched as the landscape of worship has changed. It has been thrilling to see worship develop and impact the lives of people that never would be attracted by traditional worship. But it has also been confusing and sometimes bewildering. Our churches have become so diverse that it’s hard to say any more what Christian worship is. Traditional worship, often called “classic” worship in many places, is still strong in some churches. It is here. But almost every church of any size has a contemporary service (or that’s all they do). There are emerging forms of worship among young people that are reclaiming ancient worship and combining it with new technologies. There are ethnic worship experiences, particularly in the African-American and Hispanic populations. And many large churches are splitting up into multiple campuses and worship venues which feature different styles of music; then they all settle back for a video feed of the sermon from a central location to all the various campuses.

I wonder how they teach that Intro to Worship course now. I feel like we all need an introduction to worship again. Regardless of the style of worship, are there some things that are consistent in all good worship? Are there some things we can say about worship across the board?

Our Psalm today is a hymn of introduction to worship. It literally moves people into the worship space, and it also makes some fundamental statements about the nature of worship. James Mays, a Bible scholar, says, “Psalm 100 initiates worship *and* sets forth a theology of worship.”¹ The Psalm tells the congregation what to do: “*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ...Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.*”² This is literally the movement of the people from outside the Temple into the worship space in the courtyard.

Between the instructions, the Psalmist tells why we are supposed to worship in this way: “*Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ...For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*”³ Today I want to focus on the “why” of worship. Why is worship required of us? Why are we here? What’s the point?

We worship because of who God is. We know who God is, and that brings out the worship in us. The Psalmist says, “*Know that the Lord is God.*”⁴ God is God, and we are not. No other god is God; only the Lord is God. There is one God, and we worship that God.

We also know the character of our God: “*The Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*”⁵ God is God, and God is good; that pretty much sums it up. God loves us; God is faithful to us. God is almighty in power, awesome in glory, infinite in knowledge and wisdom. Yet God cares for us individually, as God’s children. When we worship, we come into the presence of this amazing God. Worship is an experience of awe, humility, wonder, and even fear.

We often talk about the fear of God, coming into his presence with fear and trembling. This is not the kind of fear that means afraid. We should not be afraid of God, like God is going to hurt us. But we should be awed and overwhelmed thinking that we are in God's presence—even here, even now! God is so utterly awesome, it's scary.

This summer in New York City we visited two great cathedrals, St. Patrick's and St. John the Divine. I love the old churches, the grand gothic structures. There is just a sense of presence in those spaces that is unmistakable. The vaulted ceilings, the stained glass windows, the massive altars, the elevated pulpits are all human ways to communicate the character of God. They call forth worship.

Coming into the presence of an awesome and overwhelming God should convict the casual way we normally approach worship. Annie Dillard wrote in her book *Teaching A Stone To Talk*:

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ...On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of [dynamite] to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.⁶

I'm not going to stop shaking hands and greeting people as we gather for worship, but I do think we need to take this time and this place seriously, because God is here.

The second reason we worship is because of **what God has done**. God is our creator. The Psalmist says, "*It is he that made us, and we are his.*"⁷ We are his creatures, and we bow before God in gratitude and praise. Not only did God make us, but God also claims us. God

loves us with a steadfast love. God made a way through the Law, then the prophets, then God's only-begotten Son, to be in relationship. When we stray from the path, God forgives us. And at the end, God makes a heavenly home for us to enjoy for all eternity. Wow! How can our hearts respond except to give thanks for all God has done?

Watching a weatherman on TV might not be your idea of interesting. But watching a weatherman watch the weather sometimes is. There is a weatherman in Chicago named Tom Skilling, age 65, who has been doing the weather for a long time. Last year he was caught on camera observing the total solar eclipse. In the moments leading up to the eclipse, Tom reported that some people started sobbing at the magnitude of the experience. Then when the eclipse started happening, Tom was so overwhelmed he couldn't speak. He apologized to his crew and said, "I'll get my act together, guys," but all he could do was to mutter over and over, "Look at that. Wow. Look at that."

After the eclipse, Tom Skilling said he wasn't ashamed. "I'm kind of an emotional guy and it snuck up on me ... I was overwhelmed by the enormity of it ... it makes you realize we're a very, very small part of a huge universe."⁸

Have you seen any amazing evidence of what God has done? Has God been good to you? Did God give you a healthy body, a family, a home, abundant material blessings? Did God give you people to love, a meaningful purpose in life, a great country and community in which to live? Did God provide a way to overcome your sins and walk by faith and enter into eternal life when you die? Yes, God did! We are thankful for what God has done, so we worship him. "*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.*"⁹

Thanksgiving brings forth the praise of worship. Rod Cooper used to be the team chaplain for two professional sports teams in Houston—the Astros baseball team and the Oilers football team. At the time both teams played in the Astrodome. He described the joy and celebration he saw at the ball games when the teams did well. Whether it was a

touchdown or a home run, the reaction was the same: cheering, jumping up and down, high fives. The crowd went wild. Any sports fan knows what I'm talking about. Cooper said, "I'm not saying that when you come to church you need to give each other high fives or do cartwheels down the aisle, but worship is a time of anticipation and expectation. We come together because all week God has been knocking home runs and scoring touchdowns in our lives. Worship is a time to celebrate what God has done for us."¹⁰

Maybe worship ought to be like halftime in the locker room—football or basketball, take your pick. It's time to celebrate what has been accomplished. It's time to correct our mistakes. It's time to take a few minutes to rest and renew our strength. And it's time to anticipate our victory. Nobody ever says at the end of halftime, "OK, let's go out there and lose!"

We worship God because of who God is, because of what God has done, and because of **who we are**. The Psalmist says, "*We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*"¹¹ We have a relationship with God. We are wired for worship. There is an innate sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that draws us toward God. You have a hunger for God, or else you wouldn't be here.

Author Frederica Mathewes-Green puts this in a way I can understand: cinnamon rolls! She writes:

My hunch is that you are already sensing something of God's presence, or you wouldn't care. Picture yourself walking around a shopping mall, looking at people and the window displays. Suddenly, you get a whiff of cinnamon. You weren't even hungry, but now you really crave a cinnamon roll. This craving isn't something you made up. There you were, minding your own business, when some drifting molecules of sugar, butter, and spice collided with a susceptible patch inside your nose. You had a real encounter with cinnamon—not a mental delusion, not an emotional projection, but the real thing.

And what was the effect? You want more, now. And if you hunger to know the presence of God, it's because ... you have already begun to scent [God's] compelling delight.¹²

We want more of God because we have had a little taste of God. We know God. We know God's Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Shepherd; we are his sheep. Jesus is our Savior. When times get tough, and we experience the tragedies of life, Jesus helps us. God holds us in his hand. That's why we worship him.

One of the people who has had a great impact on worship in the last twenty years is songwriter and Christian recording artist Steven Curtis Chapman. On May 17, 2008, the Chapman family suffered a devastating loss. Their five-year-old daughter, Maria, adopted from China, was struck and killed when Chapman's seventeen-year-old son was pulling his SUV into the family's driveway. One minute the Chapmans were blessed beyond measure; the next minute they were plunged into every parent's nightmare. When the accident happened, Steven rushed out of the house, and as he took his daughter's body into his arms, he cried out to God, "O God, don't require this of me! Don't require this of me!" But Maria couldn't be saved.

About four months after this tragedy, I saw Chapman in concert, and he took a few minutes to share how in the midst of this tragedy, he had found amazing comfort in his faith and a peace that passes all understanding. His daughter's death made him re-evaluate all his songs to see if he really believed the words of faith that he was singing. With one song in particular, he felt moved to write an additional verse. The song is called "Yours," and the theme of the song is how everything in the world belongs to God. Everything is in God's hand—life, death, blessing, and tragedy—because we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture. In the aftermath of Maria's death, Steven Curtis Chapman now sings:

I've walked the valley of death's shadow
so deep and dark that I could barely breathe.
I've had to let go of more than I could bear and

I've questioned everything that I believe.
Still even here in this great darkness
a comfort and a hope comes breaking through,
as I can say in life or death
God we belong to you.¹³

That's what worship is all about. Everything belongs to God. We worship because of who God is, what God has done, and who we are in relationship to God. That's what moves us into this place of worship: "*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing! ...Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name!*"¹⁴ You are now welcome to worship!

¹ James L Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 317.

² Psalm 100:1, 2, 4.

³ Psalm 100:3, 5.

⁴ Psalm 100:3a.

⁵ Psalm 100:5.

⁶ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper& Row, 1982), p. 40.

⁷ Psalm 100:3b.

⁸ Elyse Wanshel, "This Weatherman's Reaction to the Eclipse Was So Amazingly Pure," *Huffington Post* (8-22-17).

⁹ Psalm 100:4.

¹⁰ Rod Cooper, "Worship or Worry?" *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 108.

¹¹ Psalm 100:3c.

¹² Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer* (Paraclete Press, 2009), pp. xiii-xiv.

¹³ Jonas Myron and Steven Curtis Chapman, "Yours," See also Elizabeth Diffin, "Still Blessing His Name," *Today's-Christian.com* (on-line exclusive).

¹⁴ Psalm 100:1, 4.