



Worship: Praise

Ephesians 1:3-14

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July 11, 2021

490.

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It has been 490 days since March 8, 2020 – which was the last Sunday we had a *live* worship service in this Sanctuary space.

Over the past year, and especially this past Sunday as a small group gathered for worship in the sanctuary to participate in worship on the big-screen ... over the past year I've thought a lot about worship. Honestly, even though we had worship pretty much every Sunday prior to the pandemic – maybe with the few exceptions of terrible snow days – I've thought more about worship in the past 490 days than I think I ever had before.

I know this isn't necessarily true for everyone, but for me, there was always this known entity that was the worship hour of Sunday morning from 10am – 11am. I'd spend time every week writing a sermon, and doing some necessary check ins with staff and members to make sure we were ready for Sunday morning. And, while I don't want to make it sound like a lot of time wasn't put in to bringing together the worship service prior to the pandemic, honestly, it was nothing like the past 490 days.

Planning and implementing worship online has been challenging. Kyle's planning the music and identifying ways to have people be involved in recording music on top of his own time to record the music, all of which takes more time than it did before. Working with liturgists ahead of time, getting recordings ready, finding other ways to share in baptisms and new membership, all of it requires more than just asking someone to show up on Sunday morning ready to participate in a one-hour event. Even the minor details, like thinking through announcements, and prayers, and instructions for how to participate in worship from home ... not to mention video editing ... it's taken more planning time than in-person worship ever took.

And I know that the online worship experience is vastly different than in person worship. I've heard a number of times over the past year, including last Sunday with worship on the big screen in the Sanctuary, that worshipping from home – worshipping on video – just doesn't *feel* the same. While we have some ability to connect with one another, saying hello on the chat is not the same as giving someone a hug or a handshake.

So, I've been thinking, and asking even myself, what *is* worship? What is the purpose of worship? Why and how do we worship?

I think in many places, for many churches, and for many a faithful disciple, worship has become a commodity. It's something we ingest, no different than the sushi I had last night. For many, worship is about consumption – it's about going somewhere to receive what we long to receive (whether that's a specific theological perspective, a space to gather in community, a promise of prosperity, or a call to service). It's been discussed for some time now how church attendance has become like mall shopping was in the late 90s: if you don't like what you find in store number 1, you just continue to check out the rest of the stores until you find something that satisfies your appetite. Old Navy, JC Penny, American Eagle, or Neiman Marcus – just keep shopping and you're bound to find something that works.

As we continue to worship from home, or on video, for the next couple months before we begin offering live in-person worship again, I want us to spend some time thinking through what *worship* is all about.

It just so happens that Ephesians is offered in the summer lectionary in full for the next seven weeks, and this letter offers some great guidance for better understanding worship. Each week, we'll use a portion of the text to look at seven components that make up worship – from peace, to prayer, to confession, to preparation. We'll consider how these key components of worship invite us to claim a more faithful presence in worship – whether worship is happening live in the Sanctuary, recorded at home, or at any other time or place. On Wednesdays, we'll offer a small group time to dive even deeper into the letter and Bible study. I hope that you'll receiving this invitation to engage deeper in worship, and to claim the promise of God's presence in your midst.

Before we can dive in to the text itself, let me spend just a few moments setting the context for this letter to the early church in Ephesus.

Not that it matters for its significance, but it is highly unlikely that Paul is the actual author of this letter. The late Biblical Interpretation Professor, Paul Achtemeier, offers, "The language and linguistic structures – long sentences, use of complementary genitives, abundance of relative clauses with a surplus of adjectives – seem to point to someone other than Paul." But he goes on to add, "The content, however, is very Pauline."ⁱ

Another complication with this letter is that the letter may not have been written to the church in Ephesus at all. The only place the letter indicates it was written to the Ephesians is in the first verse, which reads, "To the saints who are *in Ephesus* and are faithful in Christ Jesus." The words "in Ephesus" are lacking in the oldest versions of the manuscript for this text, inviting some scholars to think the words were added later to give credibility to the text. It was known Paul had visited Ephesus and that he had been an instigator for the early church in the community. Adding these two words, *in Ephesus*, ties the writing, which supposes itself to be from Paul, to a Pauline visitation.

I offer these two notes of uncertainty *not* to discredit the text, but to acknowledge that this text was written to a community of God's people at a specific moment of time. In this way, this

letter is akin to this sermon – written in a specific moment for a specific people. But rest assured, this letter carries weight for all of Christendom. This letter was written by someone who understood and spoke about God’s love in much the same way as Paul himself. In fact, the writing was so closely associated with Paul’s writings, that it was incorporated into our canon of the New Testament, and has been faithfully read and studied by Christians for nearly 2000 years.

Similar to Paul’s letters, this text begins with a greeting and salutation, followed by a prayer. Paul always prayed for the community to whom he was writing. However, Paul’s prayers were not usually three chapters long as this one is! The opening prayer in this text is a good example of how a preacher will use any chance they get to preach a sermon, even if it means preaching while praying.

The opening section of this prayer is found in our reading today, coming in verses 3-14. In these opening verses there are two complicating theological issues that we must deal with to receive our first instruction regarding worship.

The opening line of this prayer begins, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The act of offering a blessing upon God in the form of thanksgiving is a practice that is steeped in the Jewish tradition. It is a posture toward God that stems from multiple texts in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, in Exodus 18, Jethro says, “Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you from the Egyptians.” In 1 Kings 8, King Solomon says, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised.” In Nehemiah 9, Ezra proclaims, “Stand up and bless the Lord, your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and peace.”

And yet, though there is history behind this practice, have you ever heard the phrase, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow”? You may recognize this sung line from the doxology, something many churches sing weekly during the offering. If God is the one from whom all blessings flow, who are we to offer a prayer of blessing upon God?

Perhaps this opening line seems like nothing more than a word of thanksgiving. Yet, it invites us into a deeper understanding of God’s work and presence in our own lives, as the one from whom all blessings flow is the one receiving the blessing. It’s cyclical in nature, but the God who creates and blesses endows the created with the capacity to bless.

In their commentary on Ephesians, Allen Verhey and Joseph Harvard put it this way, “God summons human beings into existence and then summons them to be active in God’s own cause, to be God’s agents, to bless God.”ⁱⁱ Though God gifts us with the capacity to bless, it is still God who is the source of such a blessing.

And this complicated theological promise leads us to the second of theological complications in this text. Not only does God, as the source of all blessings, gift us with the capacity to bless, but

this is work that is predetermined by God. Listen to these phrases in the text: verse 4 offers, “just as he chose us in Christ ...” Verse 5 begins, “He destined us for adoption.” Verse 11 includes, “In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of God.”

There is perhaps no other text more complicating in the theological discourse on predestination – a belief that has many – *many* – different interpretations. There are some who believe that each individual person has a pre-determined destination by God, as in, God has chosen individually and specifically for each of us all the actions of our entire life. There are others who believe that God has not chosen for us any action, but that God is so omnipotent, that God knew all the actions of our entire life because *God is just that all-knowing*. By knowing this all ahead of time, it was divinely pre-determined.

The first thing to remember about this text is that, while we aren't 100% sure of who wrote it or to whom it was written, like all Pauline texts, we are fully confident it was not written to an individual. This text was written to a people – a community of believers. The author is not trying to make any statements about the destination pre-determined for any individual. The focus of this text is on a community of believers – a promise for all who have faith in Jesus Christ.

The worst thing we can do in reading this text is believe that it is something to be bragged about from an individual perspective. This text is not about me. It is not about you. It is not about any one of us. In fact, this text isn't even about *all of us*. This text is first and foremost about God, and the love of God we have in Jesus Christ. The opening line of blessing makes this abundantly clear – Blessed be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The purpose of this text on the topic of predestination is nothing more than to offer an invitation to consider God's intentionality in offering an all-encompassing love to all of humanity. Let us not forget that this letter is being written to a Gentile audience – those who had long been considered outside the realm of God's love – those outside the Jewish connection. Consider the impact of such a letter for those who had never been invited to be part of God's people in hearing the promise that says, “Not only are you invited in, but God destined you to be a part of this community.” This is God's desire and will for you. This text isn't trying to kick people out, it's trying to help everyone understand that from the start of time, it was God's desire that they be invited in.

And this promise of invitation, this statement of inclusion, this guarantee of participation, it leads to our first cornerstone of worship – worship begins with posture of praise.

We come into a place of worship to give thanks to the God who created us, who breathed life into us, who gifted us with the Spirit, who not only *wants* our involvement, but who *destined* our association. This letter, written to the outsiders of the historic faith, is a reminder that there is no one beyond the reach of God's love. Whether you've been a part of the church for 100 years, or if you've been running from the church for 100 years, God's divine inspiration does not change. God created humanity to be a part of the work of God in the world.

The posture of God is one of incarnational love – it’s one of expansive love – it’s a promise that you, and me, and everyone around us, is not only invited to be a part of this heavenly kingdom, but that since the beginning of time, God has awaited our presence in this divine fellowship.

We enter into the fellowship of God in awe of such an promise, which is why this letter begins with this a posture of praise – blessing God for blessing us, and proclaiming that we are only in this place, we are only part of this body, we are only capable of offering such a blessing to God, because of what God first did for us. Worship is at its core a space of gratitude, of grace, and of praise. And it doesn’t matter if you’re here in the Sanctuary, or if you’re home on the couch, watching a live organist or sharing on the screen, if you’re traveling near or abroad, or even if it’s Sunday morning or not – worship can take place anytime marked with a reminder that we are desired by the one who created us. We are destined to fulfill the calling of those created in the image of God, because it is God who destined us. Such an invitation and promise begins with praise. Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Paul Achtemeier. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2009.

ⁱⁱ Allen Verhey. *Ephesians: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.