

Psalm 148

Praise God! Praise God from the heavens;

praise God in the heights!

Praise God, all you angels of God;

praise God, all you host of heaven!

Praise God, you sun and moon;

praise God, all you shining stars!

Praise God, you highest heavens,

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of God,

for God commanded and they were created.

God established them forever and ever;

God fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise God from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God's command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Beasts of the forest and all cattle,  
crawling things and flying birds!

Rulers of the earth and all peoples,  
nobles and all leaders of the earth!

Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Sovereign,  
whose name alone is exalted;  
whose glory is above earth and heaven.

God has raised up a horn for the people,  
and praise for all the faithful,  
for the people of Israel who are close to God.  
Praise be to God!

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon: Halleluiah

I appreciate that such a nice group of people have gathered here this morning to join together in worship. It's hard to know what to expect the Sunday following Christmas or Easter – and I don't suspect it is any different now than it has been forever, the crowded holidays give way to the smaller gathering and the quieter mood of a usual Sunday congregation.

I always enjoy Christmas Eve, especially meeting the extended family of our church members and those who return after being absent for a while. I don't entirely agree with the sentiment expressed by this New York Times columnist, although I do know what he was talking about in this opinion piece from a week ago:

A Tough Season for Believers

By ROSS DOUTHAT

Christmas is hard for everyone. But it's particularly hard for people who actually believe in it.

In a sense, of course, there's no better time to be a Christian than the first 25 days of December. But this is also the season when American Christians can feel most embattled. Their piety is overshadowed by materialist ticky-tack. Their great feast is compromised by Christmukkwanzaa multiculturalism. And the once-a-year churchgoers crowding the pews beside them are a reminder of how many Americans regard religion as just another form of midwinter entertainment, wedged in between "The Nutcracker" and "Miracle on 34th Street."

The question this column brought to my mind – the challenge really - is how important it is to be mindful that worship is something we offer, not something we receive. It has very little to do with the size of the congregation or the date on the calendar, but everything to do with what we bring in our hearts and minds when we come through those doors and enter this space set aside for praise and prayer.

Worship does not require a packed church. There was nothing crowded and outsized about the congregation at the first Christmas. A small group of shepherds followed by Magi from the East.

What worship does require is worshippers whose hearts are set on God.

There is an old story about a time when President Lyndon Johnson asked his press secretary Bill Moyers to say grace at lunch. As Moyers prayed Johnson said "Speak up, Bill, I can't hear a damn thing." "Mr. President," Moyers gently replied, "I wasn't speaking to you."

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 descendeth. Our full homage to demand.

What does it mean to worship – to give homage, to praise. The psalms are full of praises, of Hallallejuahs and Amens – although this can sound more like a holy roller church than our quiet reformed protestant way with three hymns two readings and a sermon tuned to the mind as much as the heart.

I think we have something to learn about worship from the Pentecostal tradition, even though a steady diet of it would be more than I can take.

But I don't think the outward form is the important issue here. And when I read the warnings about worship in Jesus and the prophets, the focus is not on the form of worship but on the attitudes and behavior of the worshipper.

Jesus tells of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. Jesus says:

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

And there is also the famous passage from the Prophet Amos speaking the word of the Lord to the people about how their worship is unacceptable because they don't seek to do the will of God in all the other areas of their life:

Thus says the Lord: I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

In those two examples there is a easily understood violation of what God expects from worship – which is sincerity, forgiveness, humility and integrity.

But in a story from Leviticus there is no specific evidence to conclude that falseness, pride, judgment or hypocrisy were a cause of danger to the worshipper. And yet the scripture says that Aaron's two eldest sons actually died in the sanctuary when they drew near before God. Now Aaron's sons, Nadab (nay'dab) and Abihu (uh-bi'hyoo), each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord." (Leviticus 10:1-2, NRSV)

Then the Lord spoke to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.

This story has been a bit of a puzzle to the scholars down through the centuries. What was the cause of the Lord's displeasure at the worship offered by the two sons of Aaron?

Over the years scholars have suggested that the key phrase, the central clue to understanding this event is :such as he had not commanded them. God did not forbid them from bringing the fire, but God did not command them to do it either. They did it out of their own desire.

One commentator suggests that this is precisely the problem. The worship of God when offered to serve our own desires and needs, is a form of idolatry. Worship which is done for self-satisfaction is a form of self worship, of unholy fire.

The commentator concludes: This is a very important lesson for all generations: not to transform the worship of God into a means to satisfy one's inner urges. It does not matter if one sincerely believes he (or she) is serving God; in satisfying one's own needs, one serves oneself.

Thomas Merton once wrote that in the fall from grace Adam had become his own poor fallible little god. Everything now had to serve him, since he no longer served the Creator. Adam's fall was through himself so it was that his own pride, desires, needs and fears that created a barrier between himself and God. Adam is sinking in the quicksand of himself, so how can he save himself?

God reaches out a hand to save in Jesus Christ – the one who said: For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

We call our worship a service, but who do we serve? When we walk out of here, how do we judge if our worship has been good, bad, indifferent, safe or dangerous? Have we gathered in the presence of God because we understand this is what God wants us to do or to we come to satisfy our own needs. I think it is key to always remember the one to whom our worship is directed, the one who hears our words and rightfully demands our respect. Each of us, whether in the pulpit or in the pew, has our own challenge in this regard – worship takes private work. As a group, the best we can do is keep before us

the clear calling of Jesus to set aside self-concern and serve our God with heart, soul, strength, and mind.

The magi traveled long and far to find the manger – at the sight of it they were overwhelmed with joy and entering they saw the child with Mary his mother and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

May God accept our worship and gifts and bless us with joy at the service we are privileged to render this day.