

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Worship" *Sermon revised from "Gifts" preached at Kerrisdale Presbyterian on January 11, 2009

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Opening Hymn: As with gladness men of old #172 (1-4)

Closing Hymn: We three kings #173 (congregation 1,5; solos 2,3,4)

Children's Hymn: All hail King Jesus #268

Choruses: The first nowell 136

Rev. Steve Filyk

January 5, 2020

1st Sunday after Christmas

Epiphany Sunday

Communion

Question: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.ⁱ

The Westminster Shorter Catechism,

Written in 1646 tells us that worship,

That glorifying God,

is the central purpose and activity of every Christian
(male or female).

I'd like to think that most of us understand this.

Each Sunday we gather together.

At the door we pick up the "order of worship", the bulletin.

We speak and we listen

And we sing songs to God together.

Our worship continues when we leave the service.

During the hours and days that follow,

We honor God in our work and our leisure.

Our worship extends throughout the week.

But if worship can be so specific as to describe
Our hour together on Sunday morning,
And so broad as to include our activities during the week,
The word may strike you as a little ambiguous.

Today I'd like to add a little more definition,
A little more substance to that word 'worship'.

To do so we will be using today's Bible lesson from Matthew.
The story of the wise men, the Magi
Provide a good picture of worship
And help us explore its facets.

Their story reveals at least three elements of worship.

First of all, worship is portrayed as costly.

Now this might come as a bit of a surprise.

When we speak of worship we often talk about its benefits:
what we take away from it.

At its best good worship should delight, inspire, and move.ⁱⁱ

But fundamental to worship
Is self-giving.

Just consider the journey of the wise men.
They gave up the comforts of home and family
to travel to a distant land.

They would travel by foot,
Or maybe on a camel.

[There were no Lear jets nor highways for limousines.]

They would know hot days and cold nights.

They would face dust and wind, maybe even snow.

I find it rather interesting that when they made that last leg
from Jerusalem to Bethlehem
no-one followed them.

It seems that for the local priests and scribes
those last 9 miles were way too far.

Worship is not always easy.

Simply getting out on Sunday can be a real challenge.

There are the challenges of ice roads and snowy streets.
And there is the temptation to turn the wheel
towards Costco or Starbucks instead.

Even when we get here,
Sometimes our time together doesn't seem worth it.

You may have brought your gifts expecting the wonders of a palace,
But like the wise men,
End up in a modest home.

PAUSE

Now all that I'm saying isn't meant to discourage you,
but to give you hope.

Have you ever felt frustrated
because you thought something was going to be easy,
and it ended up taking your twice the effort
and four times the time?

And so you ask yourself:
"What am I doing wrong?"

Well if you found the journey hard this morning,
don't think that there is something wrong with you.

Worship is costly, and it requires great effort,
Whether giving yourself in a Sunday Service,
or offering yourself throughout the week.

Jesus said to his followers,
"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me
For whoever wants to save their life will lose it
And whoever loses their life for me will find it."ⁱⁱⁱ

The wise men teach us that worship is costly.
And they also teach us that worship is focused on Christ.

Some churches place all their focus and emphasis on God the Father.
Others ponder God in the most general philosophical terms:
the creator or first cause,
the source of life or energy that holds the world together.

Yet the wise men had a more particular focus.

While they could have stayed at home and contemplated the creator,
the saddled up their camels in search for the King of the Jews.

They studied the signs that they saw in the heavens,
and they considered the direction they found in Scripture.

And when they finally found the child that they were searching for,
they knelt down and paid him homage,
they worshipped him.

The particularity of Christ is sometimes a scandal for us.

Some of us brace when prayers are made in a broader gathering
Worrying that using Jesus' name
will offend people who follow other faith traditions.

But while retreating to a worship that focuses on universals
may appear to be unifying
it denies both who we are,
and how God has been revealed to us.

A former colleague once told me
about an inter-faith gathering he attended.

Sometime during the meeting,
a protestant minister led the group in prayer.

The prayer was a poetic address to a generic, non-descript God.

After the 'amen', a rabbi sitting next to my colleague leaned in and asked,
"Do you have any idea who she was speaking to?"

The particularity of Jesus may seem scandalous.

And yet I think it is also a reason for celebration.

Our God is not simply a force that animates the universe.

The God we worship has become incarnate in Jesus.

God knows what it means to be human.

Jesus understands our struggles and shares our joys.

Worship is costly. Worship is centered on Christ.

And worship is intended to be joyful.

Joyful?

We don't always experience this, do we?

Of course,

much of this depends on our orientation towards worship.

For some worship is a duty.

It is something we perform out of obligation:

part of a well-ordered life.

It is like paying our taxes,

and keeping our yard neat and clean.

Duty may have its part in worship.

The wise men were foreign emissaries who were conscious of protocol.
They knew that it was good and right to honor this king.

And yet duty often turns sour.
It can be performed begrudgingly.
It can become lifeless and dull.

But this is not what we see in our story.
When the wise men arrived in Judea,
they lose sight of the star.

And so, they inquire with Herod, who in turn consults the Scriptures.
He directs them to Bethlehem,
the land that the prophets spoke of.

As they returned to their journey, the star suddenly reappears,
stopping over the location of the child.

And the wise men we are told, were overjoyed.
In the word of the Revised Version,
they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”

When they arrived at the house
And saw Jesus and Mary,
The threw their selves at his feet, and worshipped him.

Some of us can speak of moments when we “rejoiced exceedingly”.
But many of us find ourselves underwhelmed.

I can say this not just because I watch you each Sunday,
but because every once in a while,
I get to go to church and sit in the pews.

It's hard not to notice how the one hymn was too high,
and the other song dragged on,
How the sermon was contradictory,
And the preacher lacked enthusiasm,

How barely anyone bothered to say 'hi',
except for one over-caffeinated designated greeter
who kept calling me by the wrong name.

Worship doesn't always seem like an encounter,
let alone one filled with joy.

And yet when we abandon the chair of the critic.
When we open ourselves to what is happening
and give ourselves away...
It seems that God is waiting to meet us.

Through the cracks in the cadence,
the poor grammar and bad analogies,
something happens,
we are given a glimpse of Christ.

This fresh encounter with God produces incredible joy.

Maybe that's why some of us keep coming back.

Maybe that's what some of us are still searching for.

And maybe that's what these worshipping wise men
are here to reveal.

Worship is costly.

Worship is about Christ.

Worship promises joy.

May 2020 be a year of worship.

And may we rejoice exceedingly.

Amen.

ⁱ Westminster Shorter Catechism "Question 1"

ⁱⁱ Elements of a good sermon that I have heard attributed to St. Augustine

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 16:24-25 NIV