

COME AWAKE TO GOD

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 18, 2019
based on Psalm 100; Matt. 24:42–44; Romans 13:11–12; Eph. 5:8–14**

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a sermon series entitled, “Come into God’s Presence.” The theme Scripture for the series is Psalm 100, which we heard this morning, which specifically invites us to *enter God’s presence*. Psalm 100 was used by the people of Israel as they entered into the temple in Jerusalem. The psalm refers to entering the gates and courtyards of the temple; it is a psalm of worship. In this series we will be looking at what the Bible as whole says about *worship*, and we will find that everything that the Bible says about worship also tells us a great deal about the spiritual life in general, about how it is that we can indeed enter and live in the presence of God. {prayer}

On an average Sunday in America, 20 percent of the population is in worship. That means that by being here this morning, or by connecting digitally with this worship service, you are in a distinct minority. About 40 percent of the population participates in worship at least occasionally. But 80–90% of Americans believe in God. That means that there are a great many people who think that worship is an optional activity which a person who believes in God might choose to do.

The Biblical picture—and in fact the whole history of religion—says the opposite. In the Bible, belief and worship are inseparable; people who believe always express that belief in worship. As Abraham answers God’s call, he builds altars for worship as he journeys into the land of Canaan. When the people of Israel escape from Egypt by God’s deliverance and are journeying through the wilderness, the main and lasting thing that they do is to build a movable worship space called the tabernacle, so that they can gather regularly to worship God as they travel. When people in New Testament days respond to the disciples’ preaching about the Risen Jesus, the first thing that they do is to gather together in people’s homes for worship.

The intimate connection between belief and worship can be seen in every ancient culture. In last summer’s sermon series, entitled “Why Believe?” I noted that ancient human societies universally believed in God; and that belief always took shape in worship. Whenever we do an archaeological dig of an ancient site, we always find worship centers. Whether they are the grand temples of central America or the simple stone circles of Celtic England or the impressively decorated sanctuaries of Egypt, such worship spaces were at the very center of ancient societies. In fact, as we have studied religion in depth, scholars have come to realize that worship is actually *prior* to developed beliefs. Ancient peoples did not first come up with beliefs about God and then decide that maybe worship was something that they ought to do. They worshipped God, and out of that experience of worship they began to develop particular beliefs.

Worship arises out of a fundamental human awareness that there is a greater Reality, an Ultimate Being, who is behind and beyond all things. That sense of a Higher Power evokes in human beings a feeling of awe, and a perception that we are being drawn into a relationship with this God who is the Source of our existence. This then is what worship, at the most basic level, is—it is the human being entering, with a sense of reverence and with uplifted heart, into the presence of God.

In the Biblical story, as people encountered God and responded with reverence, they began to get a clearer picture of who God is. Abraham, as he sensed God's call, perceived that God has a destiny for us and a plan of salvation for all humanity. Moses, when he encountered God in a burning bush, perceived that God cares for people who are suffering and is at work for deliverance. The prophets perceived that God is a God of justice who lifts up the lowly. Biblical beliefs became progressively shaped by these encounters with God; and Biblical worship then became far more than a simple response to a mysterious entity. In the Bible, worship became a movement of lifting one's heart to the one God who has revealed himself to us, showing himself to be loving and gracious, providing abundantly for us. The essential nature of Biblical worship can be seen in Psalm 100, a quintessential psalm of worship.

The Psalm begins, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord." (Psalm 100:1a) This verse is often cited as proof that God is pleased even when we are singing off key in church, since all that is called for is noise! The original Hebrew here actually has nothing to do with singing. The Hebrew term translated "make a joyful noise"—הַרְיֵעוּ *ha-ri-u*—is a general term, used in a variety of situations, which means "to raise a loud exuberant shout." Think of children going out onto a playground for recess. Do we come to worship with that kind of exuberance? The suggestion is not that we should begin worship with loud chaos, but rather that we rightfully come to God with a real excitement, an upwelling of joy, because of who God is for us.

The verse continues, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, *all the earth*." (Psalm 100:1) It is notable that while the Bible tells the story of God's working through the particular people of Israel, the invitation to respond to God in worship goes out here to all people. This past week in the news there was a lot of conversation about the poem on the Statue of Liberty and who exactly is being invited to America. We can leave that for political conversation; but there is no question in the Bible as to who is invited to the Kingdom of God. The phrase "all the earth" means every nation and every people of every sort—all are welcomed into the gracious presence of God.

The joyous spirit of the first verse continues into the next, which says, "Worship the Lord with gladness." (Psalm 100:2a) The Hebrew word translated "gladness"—שִׂמְחָה *sim-chah*—is a very uplifting term; it indicates delight, gaiety, and abounding joy.

There's an old story about a boy in church who asked about a plaque that was hanging on the wall in the church vestibule. The pastor said that it was commemorating

those who had died in the service. The boy asked if it had been the early worship service or the late one.

Worship should not be deadly! We are urged to recognize the wonder of God, and to come before God therefore with enthusiasm and gladness, with genuinely uplifted hearts. That sense of intense joy is continued in the next phrase as it says, “Come into God’s presence *with singing*.” (Psalm 100:2b) Again the Hebrew word translated “singing” – רַנְנָה *r’nanah*—is not actually the normal word for “song.” It more precisely means “exultation.”

It is important to recognize here what it is exactly for which the Psalm is calling. We live in a culture in which we are accustomed to being entertained. So if we think of exciting, exultant worship, we naturally may think of whether a worship service is being produced in such a way that it is entertaining for us, so that it evokes in us a sense of excitement and delight. There’s a story about a pastor who was preaching and who noticed during the sermon that an elderly member of the church had fallen sound asleep in the back pew. The pastor called out to an usher and asked the usher to poke the man to wake him. The usher looked at the man, who was snoring contentedly, then looked back at the pastor and said, “Pastor, you put him to sleep. You wake him up!”

The worship leaders of our church do seek to lead worship in ways that will engage people. But it is notable that Psalm 100 does not talk about what we might hope to find in worship, that the worship service might be such an exciting production that it makes us joyous and glad, or at least keeps us awake. Psalm 100 speaks rather of what we *bring* to worship—that we come with gladness and rejoicing. We come with excitement and attentiveness and delight, not because we are anticipating a great show, but because we are coming into the presence of God.

Precisely here is the heart of worship, as it is expressed in the Psalm—to come into the presence of God. But, you might say, “Is not God always present with us?” It is true that, as the Scripture says, “God is not far from any of us, for in God we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:27–28) In reality, we are always in the presence of God. But we often become so absorbed in the things of this world that we become unaware of God’s presence. In a spiritual sense, it is as though we fall asleep to God, so that we simply do not notice that God is at hand.

This is why the Scriptures at various points tell us to wake up to God. (*The time has come for you to wake up from sleep. Romans 13:11*) We heard some of those passages in our New Testament readings this morning. In that light, when we “come into God’s presence” in worship, it is basically a movement of coming awake to God. We are opening our eyes to recognize the presence of God with us and to see the greatness of God. We are awakening our hearts to focus our vision upon God.

This past week our son Joshua began his first year at the University of Mount Union. On his first morning at the school, he had to report to the soccer team at 5:30 a.m.

for a running and fitness test. I guess that's one way to weed out the players who are not truly committed! Mavis and I were a bit worried, because Joshua likes to sleep in, and has a propensity to oversleep. In high school he would often sleep right through his alarm, although he did seem to have a mysterious ability to get up for something truly important, like a soccer game. On the fateful morning at Mount Union, he got up, and passed the test.

When the Scripture says, "Sleeper awake," whereby it is quoting an early Christian hymn, it is calling each one of us to wake up to what is most important of all—to come awake to God, so that we might enter God's presence, and so that, as the Scripture continues, "Christ will give you light." (Ephesians 5:14)

It is as we come awake to God and share in God's presence that we are able to experience what the next verse talks about as it says, "Know that the Lord is God. It is God that made us, and not we ourselves. We are God's people, and the sheep of his pasture." (Psalm 100:4) Throughout the ages, people have often wanted to imagine themselves to be self-sufficient. But in worship, we recognize our dependence upon God; and still more, we recognize that God does not abandon us but cares for us and provides for us, as a shepherd cares for the sheep. In worship, we place ourselves into the hands of God, and we come, as the Psalm says to "know that the Lord is God."

The Hebrew word translated here as "know"—**יָדָע** *ya-dah*—does not mean simply to know a fact. In relationships it means to know someone personally, as you would know a friend or a family member. So to know God means not simply to have an idea that there is a God. It means to know God in a personal relationship, to come into a real connection with God. This is what we are doing in worship; we are coming before God as God's people.

The psalm then continues with an expression of what we show towards God as we come into worship, as it says, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name." (Psalm 100:4) In the sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, which we just completed last Sunday, we noted that the Lord's Prayer begins and concludes with a focus upon God. The prayer does not start with our needs or what we might wish from God; it begins by looking to who God is, and glorifying God. Psalm 100, which was used at the start of worship in the ancient Jerusalem temple, does exactly the same thing. The entire Psalm is oriented towards God, and it encourages us to come before God with thankfulness and praise, blessing God's name.

The psalm then appropriately concludes by affirming the essential character of God that we experience in worship. As it says, "For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations." (Psalm 100:5) Three powerful terms are used here to describe God. God is *good*. The Hebrew word **טוֹב** *tov* includes all the best things you can think of when you think of goodness. God shows *steadfast love*—and the Hebrew word here for steadfast love—**חֶסֶד** *hesed*—is the most common term used in the Old Testament to describe God; it indicates a love that never gives up, love that is

poured out even when it is undeserved, love that is unending. And the Psalm declares that God is *faithful*; the Hebrew term—**אֱמוּנָה** *emunah*— translated “faithfulness,” indicates an unshakable fidelity. All this means that we can confidently entrust our lives to God as the foundation for our life.

When we think of worship, we often tend to think of the many things that we do in worship. So we may imagine that worship means singing songs and saying prayers and hearing a message and maybe taking Communion. During this sermon series, we will consider those many elements of worship—why we do them and what they mean in a broad sense for our spiritual life. But at its core, worship is what is described in Psalm 100—it is a coming into the presence of God, with joyfulness and with praise, because God indeed is good, and God’s steadfast love and faithfulness endure to all generations.