

AT THE HEART OF IT

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Psalm 24

I can say without reservation that Wednesday—this past Wednesday—was a sanctified day at First Presbyterian Church. Now, if I were to ask you what happened here at First Presbyterian Church on Wednesday, all of you would say, "The Fish Fry." Yes, our wonderful annual Fish Fry. But there was more than just the Fish Fry that day. There was also the making of the music video. The manager of Contemporary Christian artist by the name of Benjamin William Hastings, called last week and asked if they could come and take some photographs in the church. They thought that our church matched a song he is about to release. They were so taken with the architecture and with the people they met here they asked if they could come back on Wednesday and film the video for this song. And we said, "Sure." They were here all day on Wednesday filming for the video.

In addition, before the Fish Fry, we printed tickets and took them over to Compassionate Hands and said, "Tell anybody who wants to come over and have dinner with us on Wednesday." About 15 folks from Compassionate Hands came over, and they were extremely appreciative of being included. Several came up to me and thanked me personally.

So, needless to say, there was a lot going on here on Wednesday at the church. Only after we had taken down the tables and the chairs and cleaned up and turned out the lights and locked up and I was in the car for my drive home was I able to reflect on the day, to piece together all that had happened and think about what had taken place here. And as I did, I had—well, a revelation, or an epiphany. For I realized that what had taken place here on Wednesday was worship. Yes, worship. I say that because as pastor, I've got a special view of the church. I call it a 10,000-foot view of the church. I see more than most of you simply because I'm here all the time. It's not that it's anything special—I'm not bragging—I'm just here all the time at both services. I'm at all the meetings and all the gatherings, and if I'm not there, then somebody tells me what's going on. So, I have a good feeling of what goes on in the church.

So, riding home in my car thinking about all this, I realized, "This was worship."

The first thing you have to do is ask, "Well, when you say worship, what do you mean? What is worship?" And it would be so nice if we could open our scripture to one specific passage that tells us exactly what worship is. That passage doesn't exist, but what we do have is many examples of worship through the centuries. We can go back to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness; they had the Ark of the Covenant, which they viewed as the throne of God on Earth, and they carried that

with them. And when they stopped, they placed it in the Tabernacle, and at the Tabernacle, they would come and worship—worship directly to God there at the Ark. And then when they arrived in Jerusalem, and King Solomon built the Great Temple, worship became more formal, more ritualized, and they would gather there for prayer and song and offerings and sacrifices.

We can look at the New Testament, and we read early in the Gospels how Jesus would go into synagogues on the Sabbath and be invited to read. He would go to the front and read from the scripture and then interpret them. That is worship.

Later in the New Testament, we have examples and descriptions of how this new Christian community worshiped together. For example, in Acts 2, we read, *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* And we also read how they were singing spiritual songs, they were giving, they were engaging in fellowship, and even eating together. All of this is described in the New Testament about how those early Christians worshipped. And I can report to you that all of these things took place here on Wednesday.

The problem we have is that we have a rather narrow definition of worship, and it's no thanks to the Presbyterian Book of Order which tells us that for worship, we should set aside one day out of seven—the first day of the week—and designate that as the Sabbath. On that day we should gather together. So, for us, worship is every Sunday at 9:00 or 10:00 or 11:00 for that one sliver of time. That's when we come together and worship. And I'm afraid this limits our overall understanding of what worship is and what it can be. Worship is the recognition and celebration that God is Lord. In worship, we give ourselves to the one who created us. We give thanks for the blessings of our lives that come from God, and we make the promise to follow God in all that we do. One wonderful description of this is found in the first question of the Shorter Catechism, which asks, "What is the chief end of man?" A more inclusive version of that would say, "What is the main purpose of humankind?" And the answer would be, "Humankind's main purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." That is worship—to glorify God and enjoy God forever. And so, while our view of worship might be constrained to being an hour on Sunday, maybe it's more than that. Maybe it took place in the aggregation of those events that occurred on Wednesday. We prepared for worship. The Book of Order tells us that when we worship we must prepare. *Decently and in order*, of course, is the term that we use. We don't come in here worship haphazardly. We plan for worship. And we planned for Wednesday. People ordered food, made food, and gathered supplies. We did all those things so that we could gather together decently and in order out on the lawn. We had singing from two wonderful artists. We sang spiritual songs. We also sang "Hotel California," and it was fun. There was prayer. I prayed as we gathered for our meal. But there were other prayers too, such as, "Oh, God, please don't let it rain." We even took up an offering, didn't we? You gave Jonathan your seven dollars when you came for your meal. Some of you gave more. You gave your offering. There was community and fellowship at the meal. We invited folks from our community as

a form of welcome, but also as a form of service and engagement. All of these things coming together made that entire day, from start to finish, a moment of worship. I'm not saying that at one particular time, say 3:15 in the afternoon, there was worship. No, it was from 8:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night. In this 12-hour period, there was worship.

Why is it that I was thinking about worship? Well, because earlier in the week I had already decided that I wanted to look at Psalm 24, and Psalm 24 is a psalm about worship. That psalm helped me to see the big picture on Wednesday.

Scholars have labeled Psalm 24 as an *entrance liturgy*. We might think of it as a Call to Worship. It was written about 100 years before Jesus, and it was meant to be read or sung as people entered into the temple in Jerusalem as a preparation for worship. As I go through this psalm, I want you to listen to the joy and the exuberance for worship that we find here. This psalm shouts out to God.

We generally think of this psalm as having three parts. As I read through it, I want you to think of these parts as being recited by the people and the priests. If you've got any theatrical experience in your background, think about the actors reciting their lines on a stage.

The first part is verses 1 and 2, and here you can envision the congregation gathering outside the temple gates waiting to enter into worship. They are gathered for worship, waiting to come in, and the priest cries out, *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it*. He goes on to say, *The world and those who live in it, for God has founded it on the seas and established it on the waters*. These opening words are a declaration of creation. God created the earth. The earth belongs to God. When you start worship, start there at the beginning—a reminder of who God is and what God has done.

For the second part of the psalm, imagine another priest posing this question to the people who are gathered. He poses the question, *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?* This question is truly the heart of this liturgy. The hill represents Jerusalem. The Holy Place is the temple. The priest stands at the door and asks, *Who shall come in here?*

We can look at this question in two ways. It can be a restriction, or it could be an invitation. If we look at it as a restriction, then we interpret the question as, "Who is worthy? Who has done what is right? Who has most rigorously adhered to God's commands?" And if we pose it that way it becomes a filter to weed out the undeserving. I have no doubt that some have used it in that manner, saying, "You are not worthy to come into this holy place."

But I'd rather look at it in another way—as invitation that shouts out, "Who will join us here in this holy space?" After this question has been posed, I imagine

that the people respond declaring, *Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from the Lord of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek God, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.* That's the response. Who is worthy to come here? Those who have clean hands and those whose hearts are pure. Those are the ones God welcomes in his temple.

These words, however, are more aspirational than descriptive, because who of us truly has hands that are clean and hearts that are pure, who does not lie or is deceitful? But that is what we aspire to be, and those are the people who are welcomed into God's temple. This psalm suggests that clean hands—that is, those who do the will of the Lord—and those with pure hearts who are open and loving, those come because they fully entrust themselves to God.

And then in Part 3, which is the final section of the Psalm, we find a litany of celebration. Now, the priest cries out, *Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.* Another priest shouts, *Who is the King of glory?* And the crowd responds, *The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.* The priest repeats the first line, *Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.* And the priest asks again, *Who is this King of glory?* And together, the people shout out the closing line of the psalm, *The Lord of Hosts, he is the King of Glory.* And with those words, the doors of the temple are thrown open, and the people enter to worship.

Our experience here on Wednesday, here at the church, with all that was going on all day, shows to me, and I hope to you, that worship does not have to be confined to a specific time. That worship can take place in other ways, in ways that we may not even expect. In fact, it should take place in other ways.

And so, my challenge to you is to watch for those other ways, to be open to the ways in which we might celebrate God's presence in our lives. It may be big, like a Fish Fry, or maybe small. I call these moments “micro-worship”—just a little point in time in which we recognize God in our world and in our lives, and we respond by offering ourselves to God. Watch for these moments, be changed by these moments, be energized and fulfilled by these moments, for the Psalm tells us that we will be rewarded in our worship of God. I can't tell you where you will find these moments, but I will tell you that if you look, they are there. Please, embrace them. Amen.