

## *Passionate Worship: Encountering the Holy*

Psalm 84:1-2,10

Not long ago a farmer went to the city and attended a big city church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was. *“Well,”* said the farmer, *“It was good. They did something different, however. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns.”*

*“Praise choruses,”* said his wife, *“What are those?”*

*“Oh, they’re okay. They’re sort of like hymns, only different,”* said the farmer.

*“Well, what’s the difference?”* asked his wife.

The farmer said, *“Well it’s like this - If I were to say to you:*

*‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ well that would be a hymn. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you:*

*Martha Martha, Martha, Oh, Martha, MARTHA, MARTHA,  
the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows,  
the white cows, the black and white cows,  
the COWS, COWS, COWS are in the corn,  
are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn,  
the CORN, CORN, CORN,’*

*Then, if I were to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well that would be a praise chorus.”*

Strangely enough, on that very Sunday a young, new Christian from the big city attended a small town church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

*“Well,”* said the young man, *“It was good. They did something different, however. They sang hymns instead of regular songs.”*

*“Hymns,”* said his wife, *“What are those?”*

*“Oh, they’re okay. They’re sort of like regular songs, only different,”* said the young man.

*“Well, what’s the difference?”* asked his wife.

The young man said, *“Well it’s like this - If I were to say to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ well that would be a regular song. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you:*

Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry  
Inclinest thine ear to the words of my mouth.  
Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by  
To the righteous, inimitable, glorious truth.

For the way of the animals who can explain  
There in their heads is no shadow of sense,  
Hearkenest they in God’s sun or his rain  
Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced.

Yea those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight,  
Have broken free their shackles, their warm pens eschewed.  
Then goaded by minions of darkness and night  
They all my mild Chilliwack sweet corn have chewed.

So look to that bright shining day by and by,  
Where all foul corruptions of earth are reborn.  
Where no vicious animal makes my soul cry  
And I no longer see those foul cows in the corn.

*Then, if I were to do only verses one, three, and four and do a key change on the last verse, well that would be a hymn.”*

Ah, the worship wars are alive and well. What makes worship meaningful to you? Is it the type of music we sing or the quality of the choir and organist (worship leader and band)? Is it the personality, or public speaking ability of the pastors? Is it the relevance of the message or the dependability of the sound

system? Is it singing with your arms raised in praise or praying with hands clasped and held close to the vest? What's worship all about?

What kind of experience in worship would cause the Psalmist to say, "*A single day in your courts (in other words, in church) is better than a thousand anywhere else*"? That's a little extreme, don't you think? What, if anything, goes on in worship that would be worth nearly three years of your life? Maybe if there was a Costco cake afterwards!

As if that wasn't enough to convince us how much the Psalmist loves to worship God, he goes on to say "*I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.*" Now there's a catchy recruiting slogan: "*Be a church greeter... it beats living in a tent!*"

I suspect that what the Psalmist longed for wasn't the well-maintained building in which worship took place. It wasn't because the music was great; the message outstanding; or because the fellowship with family and friends was wonderful. Something was taking place on a deeper level. What the Psalmist longed for was to encounter the holy; to experience the presence of God in worship. What would experiencing the presence of God be worth to you?

Rick Warren opens his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, by stating "*It's not about you,*" which is another way of saying that the universe doesn't revolve around me – or you for that matter. Like life **worship isn't about us, it's about God.** Sometimes when I visit a church I feel like a newspaper critic who goes to a restaurant anonymously and rates the establishment in a variety of categories such as cleanliness; friendliness of the wait-staff; presentation and quality of the food, and so on. Only in church we judge whether anyone spoke to us; did the choir hit any sour notes; did the organist play too fast or too slow; did I have to fight off

sleep during the message; were there noisy children disrupting my worshipful mood; did the lay reader stumble over any strange Biblical words; or could I easily find my way around an unfamiliar building? It's hard not to notice such distractions and so we need to remind ourselves that **we don't come to worship to observe and evaluate but rather to receive what God has to offer.**

What if our attitude toward worship included the expectation that God will be here, moving among us, drawing us closer to that which is holy and closer to one another, stretching our faith in unexpected ways? As Bishop Robert Schnase writes in his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, **through worship we intentionally gather in order to encounter God in Christ.** How would it change our experience on Sunday morning if we came expecting worship to be something more than singing familiar songs, saying prayers in unison and sharing our joys and concerns, as important as those practices may be, but that through the songs and prayers and Scripture readings and offering and choir anthems and, dare I hope the message, God is at work offering us forgiveness, grace, hope, courage, comfort, a prophetic word and more?

Worship has the potential to change us, stretch us and challenge us, but what makes worship passionate? **Passionate worship, according to Bishop Schnase, displays an extraordinary eagerness to offer the best in worship.** Think of it as getting ready for a really important guest at your home. What kind of preparation would you make if your boss was coming for dinner; or you were meeting your son or daughter's future in-laws for the first time; or, like the drama our youth presented during Advent, you learn that Jesus will be coming to your house for a visit? If your house is anything like our house, you get the vacuum cleaner out; straighten up any rooms that might be visited by the guests; clean the mirrors and

windows; bring out the finest china and best silverware; and use the tried and true recipes for the meal. You get everything ready because you know that someone important is coming for a visit and you want everything to be just right. What if we approached our preparation for worship like that?

Passionate worship involves leaders giving their best to make the worship experience excellent and memorable; as well as all of us – leaders and participants alike – surrounding every facet of worship with prayer. I would encourage all of us to pray that the worship we offer expresses our love for God — that our worship is about God, and about Christ and not about ourselves. Pray that through our worship we will encounter God and in that encounter we will be changed; that those who may be visiting church for the first time that day and who are hungry for a sign from God in their lives may experience God’s grace, forgiveness and hope.

We may not be able to give an adequate definition of passionate worship but we know what it is when we experience it. Have you ever had an “Aha” moment in worship when a new insight breaks into your consciousness? That’s an encounter with the holy.

We also know when worship falls short of the goal of excellence. According to Bishop Schnase, **without passion worship becomes dry, routine, boring and predictable**. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, once warned his followers about becoming a dead sect, having the form of religion but lacking its power. Worship that fails to connect us to God and one another eventually causes our faith to wither on the vine.

**Passionate worship deepens our faith, and allows God to use us to offer hope, life and love to others.** It may be a while before we reach the point where we’d willingly exchange a thousand days elsewhere for one day in church, but we might

discover something even better. We might just discover that the time we spend with God in worship is an excellent use of our time. May we reach the point where we'd rather be in worship than any place else. Amen.