

Worship – Our Eternal Calling: What’s Going On Here?

Exodus 24:1-8

Introduction – Misaligned at the Most Basic Level

Last Monday night a good number of people from our congregation meet with Nicole Thompson of Station 19 – the architectural firm from the Minneapolis that we have engaged to help us refresh our facilities. If you were here, you know that it was a very enlightening evening. Station 19 had done their homework in gathering pertinent data about our facility and our church and presented a very helpful and enlightening analysis. Conversations continue to be on-going and Station 19 will return later this month to discuss a vision for our facility development, including some concrete plans. There were several take-aways from that meeting that I received – perhaps none more important than the imperative that we develop a mission or purpose statement. I’ve thought about it for quite a while, but have resisted engaging the leadership in writing a new purpose statement. It’s a difficult process, you know: trying to write a simple but profound sentence with a committee of people. Besides, I believe we are just beginning to grasp where God is leading us and what kind of congregation he is shaping us to be. Writing a purpose statement before this time, I believe, would have been premature. But the time is right and the deacon board will begin deliberating on the topic the next time they meet.

Purpose statements – or mission statements – are essential when two or more people set out to do anything. Amos 3:3 states the obvious, “Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?” (NLT) I love English artist, Paul Robinson’s illustration of what happens when everyone is not in alignment with the same purpose. It reminds me of a vacation that Diane and I took early in our marriage.



Vacations are very important to me. When I was growing up, my family would take three weeks each year and travel from the Southwest to Long Island, NY. It was great time of adventure. When I got older, vacations became very important to me in order to refresh my energy. They are a necessary part of the rhythm of my life. I look forward to them because I need them. Because they are very important to me, I have a certain expectations. Earlier in my married life, fishing was a big part of my vacation plans because it is one of the ways that I would relax and be rejuvenated.

Now, Diane doesn’t hold a particularly high value for fishing. In fact, try as I might, fishing has not yet made it to her “bucket list.” This was especially true when we had a very young family. It must have been in 1986 when Meredith was three and Wes was one. We made plans to camp

at Twin Lakes in the Eastern Sierras. Now Diane grew up camping and she actually enjoys it. Twin Lakes is beautiful. At that time, it held the California record for brown trout, over 29 pounds! I wasn't after the brownies; the rainbows were good enough for me. Twin Lakes had good lake and stream fishing. I had been there before and done well.

We arrived in the afternoon and we set up the tent and the campsite. I made dinner and left the clean-up for Diane. I did the driving, set up the tent and did the cooking. I figured I'd done my duty. Now, to pursue the purpose for which I had planned the whole vacation. I headed off for the stream with my pole in hand. I returned about two hours later with half my limit.

Diane had spent those two hours (they were prime fishing hours, I must add) watching our two young children who were wondering where Daddy went and why they couldn't play in the rushing water – which, by the way, would have been deadly had they fallen in.

I'm still not a fan of that look. You can fill in the blanks. To this day, thirty years later, I leave the fishing pole at home when I go on vacation. It seems that while I was looking forward to being refreshed by the tug of a trout on my line, Diane was looking forward to being refreshed without the tug of a toddler on hers. We were in the same place, on vacation, but our purposes were totally misaligned. I'm sure you've never had that kind of experience.

Purpose in Corporate Worship

And what about Sunday morning worship? We're all here together in this place. Supposedly, we're all doing the same thing – worshipping. But do we really all have the same purpose and expectations? I'm not that smart, but I've been around enough to know that there are probably a number of different opinions in this room about what should happen during this hour.

Why do we do what we do in corporate worship? Whatever we do, it needs to align with the purpose or the mission of the church. And what is the mission of the church? What is the Mission of God through us? *To glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ.* You know the Great Commission: “Having gone on your way therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you “(Matt. 28:19-20). Our mission is to both be disciples and make disciples. People who follow Jesus. And people who follow Jesus, the New Testament makes clear, will become more like him. We will be transformed. What we do in this place during this hour – in worship - must serve that purpose.

But what does the Bible say about what should happen in corporate worship? Interestingly, it is not prescriptive – that is, it doesn't prescribe a set order of worship that we should use. But both the Old and New Testaments do give us descriptions of the actions of people gathered for

worship. From those descriptions, we can draw out principles of what should occur in corporate worship so that we might fulfill the church's mission.

The Old Testament describes a very complex system of corporate worship. As we will discover next week as we look at the New Testament, the church is not bound to those Hebrew worship practices. But we can grasp basic ideas of how we should approach God together and what the essential substance of our worship should be by looking in the Old Testament.

Text – Exodus 24:1-8

Then [God] said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Approach to Worship

Remember, as we come to the topic of worship, we must be biblical, learners, and servants of one another. That is written on the bottom of your notes. Keep that in mind as we go through these messages.

It would be fascinating to take a survey of understanding about what we do on Sunday mornings when we gather together for corporate worship. Some might say that we're gathered to preach the gospel so that the lost might be saved. Some, thinking in the same way, might insist that it is critical that we have the very best quality of music and speaking so as to attract people here to hear the gospel. Others might take a completely different tack. To them, Sunday morning is about teaching the Word of God to the people of God so that we might mature in Christ. Some people probably feel that the most important thing is that we are together supporting each other as we journey through this life. There are probably quite a few who have never really thought about it. You're here because it's the right thing to do. You were brought here by a spouse or a

parent and you've come along rather than fight it. For many, being here is just what you do on Sunday morning.

But we're all here together. There's more than two of us – more like 250. Can we worship together unless we agree on what we're trying to accomplish?

Corporate Worship is Event – Oriented

When we look at today's text from Exodus 24, you may not have considered it a corporate worship service. It doesn't have the usual trappings: the music, the prayers, the sermon. But in its essence, the event recorded in our passage the foot of Mt. Sinai is corporate worship. It is a meeting between God and his people. Engagement with God is the essence of corporate worship. And corporate worship is, by nature, an event. It is a gathering of people in a particular place at a particular time for a particular purpose. There are several things that I want us to note about corporate worship as illustrated in this passage.

1. The meeting was convened by God. God called the leaders and the people together. This is always the case. God is the great initiator. We come to God only by his grace, not on our own merits. One of the great principles of biblical worship is the “revelation – response equation.” God first reveals himself or his word and we respond to it. It is essential that we remember this. Otherwise, our worship will default into being centered on us.
2. Notice that the people responded (after God's revelation) in a structure of responsibility. They owned what God was requiring of them. They said they would do all that God asked of them. (Pause) Is that true of us? Every week we hear the Word of God. Every week, the Spirit of God impresses something upon our heart. Are we responding and taking responsibility to walk in obedience to what we've heard. If the mission of the Kingdom is for us to be disciples of Christ, then our obedient response is an essential part of biblical worship. Some folks think there ought to be an invitation to receive Christ each week in our worship. Folks, there is an invitation every week for you to walk in obedience to what you've heard. Are you hearing it? Are you responding? Sometimes I think we want the traditional invitation so that we don't have to respond to the Word that is given each week. Frequently, I'll encourage folks who've never received Christ to consider his invitation to do so. But each week, God challenges us to obediently follow him. Are you hearing his invitation each week? Are you following? That's biblical worship.
3. The meeting was characterized by the proclamation of the Word of God. This must always be the case. I'm a long-time church musician. I love church music and I believe that the Word of God is often proclaimed through music. The sermon is not the only way to proclaim God's Word. But it is the primary way. Preaching is central to Christian worship from as far back as the day of Pentecost. It is not that the preacher is pre-

eminent in the congregation. Please. May that never be the case in this church. That place belongs to Jesus Christ alone. But the preaching of the Word is a primary characteristic of Christian worship.

4. Finally, in this text, we see that the people together accepted the conditions of the covenant that God was forming with them. Worship should always be a continuous renewal of the relational covenant that God has established with us. We should leave this place of worship refreshed, empowered, and renewed to walk in obedience with God. If that is not happening, our worship is falling short of its biblical intention.

Corporate Worship is Covenantal in Nature

Corporate worship is also covenantal in nature. That is, it is a relational bond between God and the corporate people of God. Corporate worship is not merely a gathering of individuals. It is deeply corporate by nature. We are a people – a holy nation – that has been purchased by the blood of Christ to declare and fulfill the glory of God.

Now in our tradition as Baptists, we don't talk a lot about covenants. In our contemporary culture, the word covenant is not used very often. But we have some understanding what a covenant is. It is an agreement that puts us under obligation to another party. Today, most of us experience the obligations that are similar to a covenant in a contract. A contract is different from a covenant because there is usually the force of the law and money to leverage its fulfillment. A covenant, on the other hand, is enforced through moral character. A marriage, for example, is a covenant. We make solemn vows to each other – based on the word of our character – to remain faithful. As is shown graphically in our text, the covenant that God has established between him and us is completed only through sacrifice – the spilling of blood – the stream that gives life. Think about it. The cross, symbolizing Christ's sacrifice that sealed God's covenant with us, must always be central in our worship.

Do you realize that it is possible, in the framework and expectations of our worship to never mention Jesus' name in a single service except for the closing line of prayer? We're told by church-growth experts, "Preach to the felt needs of the people. Do a series on parenting or on family finances. That's how you'll grow your church." A lot of churches have done that with impressive growth in numbers. But without Christ at the center, it is not Christian worship. It's not forming disciples in Jesus' name. Our worship must always be Christ-centered. It is what makes worship uniquely Christian.

Appointed Times and Places Have Significance

I want to mention two more things about Hebrew or Old Testament worship and then bring the message to a close. The system of worship that is found in the Old Testament is complex with many wonderful and meaningful elements that speak of the nature of God and how we should

approach him. Worship leader, Don Moen wrote a wonderful song of worship after studying Hebrew worship. Awash in details and minutia, he sang, “I just want to be where you, dwelling daily in your presence...” I kind of felt the same way this week as I was preparing for this message.

But we can learn important things – principles that will correct and enhance our worship – from the Old Testament. For the Hebrews, worship wasn’t simply in the mind or affections. It certainly did involve intellect and emotions, but worship engaged their bodies and the physical realm as well. The tendency for modern Protestants is to de-emphasize the physical realm of worship. But the Hebrews can help us return to a fuller experience of worship if we will be observant and willing to learn.

To the Hebrews, place and time were very important. They had several festivals. Last month we talked a lot about Passover. We have a few Christian festivals as well: Easter and Christmas. We’ve begun to observe the season of Advent and All-Saints Day. Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, is also a good day for us to celebrate. We also do it culturally – Independence Day, for example is the day that we celebrate the birth of our nation. The celebration of special days is very helpful because it keeps us anchored in the Story of Salvation. That’s why the Hebrews celebrated Passover, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths, and so on. The special days helped them to remember who they were and what God had done for them.

They also worshipped in particular places. In the early days of the Hebrew people, before they were established in the Promised Land, they would always set up stone altars when God met them in a significant way. Like special days, the special places reminded them of what God had done and who they were. Special places kept them in the Story. As the Old Testament developed, Jerusalem became very significant. It was the place where God “made his name to dwell” as we learned from Nehemiah. The Temple was there. All the Jews in the Old Testament would travel to Jerusalem at least once a year to worship. Significantly, it was in Jerusalem where Jesus gave up his life as a sacrifice for our salvation.

Sign & Symbol

Next week, we will learn that location, such as Jerusalem, is no longer necessary for biblical worship. Nevertheless, worship space is still important because we are physical beings. We need signs and symbols just like the Hebrews. The two of our most meaningful worship practices – Communion and Baptism – employ the physical symbols of bread, cup, and water. We cannot deny the unique spiritual power of those practices that use symbols.

Symbols are like computer icons. They do not stand alone. Click one on your computer desktop and a program opens up. In the same way, biblical symbols such as bread, wine, water, cross,

and Bible all communicate a deeper reality in which we participate than just the substance from which they are made.

We need these things: days, worship space and symbols to keep us rooted in the understanding that worship engages all of our being – including our bodies.

Summary & Conclusion

So what shall do with all this? What is the heart of the matter for us in considering worship in the Old Testament? What is going in here when we gather to worship? What is our purpose? We need to discover a biblical purpose in worship so that, like the two people walking the dogs, we aren't pulled in opposite directions while trying to do the same thing together.

First, in worship we are to engage with God. The purpose of our worship on Sunday morning is not to evangelize unbelievers. Because we are engaging with God with the focus on Christ, the gospel will be heard and it is very possible that people, recognizing that God is present with us, will be convicted of their sin and respond to the grace of God. But evangelism is not the primary purpose of our worship. In the same way, education or teaching is not the primary purpose of our corporate worship. Like evangelism, teaching and learning will take place on a Sunday morning. But that is not the primary purpose. The purpose of worship is to engage with God.

And how do we engage with God? Some folks come to worship to feel good. Because music is so emotional, they may not feel like they've really worshipped unless they get that holy buzz from songs that really move them. Or if you're not inclined toward music but connect with a good sermon, you may not feel like you've really worshipped unless you deeply resonated with the morning message. But both of these common ways of evaluating worship fall short of a biblical understanding. They are man-centered. Our worship must be more meaningful and profound than considering what moves us.

I want to suggest that the best way to understand biblical worship – what we learn from our Hebrew forebears – is that worship is engaging with God by doing God's Story together. In biblical worship we celebrate who God is and what he has done. God is both the Object of our praise and adoration and the Subject or Substance of the worship service. And what is amazing about doing worship this way is that we have been brought into God's story through Jesus Christ. We're not on the outside doing God's Story like sport's fans in a stadium. No! We are "on the field" doing God's Story with him. Isn't that incredible? Most importantly, God's Story culminates in Jesus and his death, resurrection, and ascension. And it is Christ who should always be the high point and focal point of our worship together.

In the last 40 years, worship has become more and more important to the evangelical church. Admittedly, much of that interest has revolved around music. We're beginning to discover, however, that worship is much, much more than music. Fifteen years ago, in a young English church called "Soul Survivor" they had a fantastic worship band. People would gather to worship there because the band was so good and the leader, Matt Redman, was writing his own worship songs. They'd even done some recording and were growing in popularity. They had a good thing going and the church was exploding in numbers and enthusiasm.

But the pastor discerned that all was not well. He became convinced that the worshippers had stopped worshipping God and were worshipping the music and the band. They had become Christian idolaters. Horrified, he dismissed the band and banned music from their worship. Gutsy move. At first the church didn't know what to do in worship. But God began to break them and they repented of their idolatry of worship music. When they began to sing again, it was simply and without a band. God was birthing a new understanding of worship – that it was all about Jesus and not about the music. Through that process of repentance and renewal, the band leader, Matt Redman, wrote the song, "The Heart of Worship."

May our worship always be biblical – engaging with God by doing His Story. And may Christ always be at the center of what we do together.

The Heart of Worship

*When the music fades and all has slipped away
and I simply come.*

*Longing just to bring something that's of worth
that will bless Your heart.*

*I'll bring You more than a song,
for a song in itself is not what You have required.
You search much deeper within, through the way things appear,
Your looking into my heart.*

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship
and its all about You, its all about You, Jesus.
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it
when its all about You, its all about You, Jesus.*

*King of endless worth, no one could express
how much you deserve.
Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is Yours,
every single breath!*

By Matt Redman
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