

The Heart That Sings
II Samuel 6:12-22, Colossians 3:15-17
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
April 30, 2017
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<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/sermon04-30.mp3>

Well, good morning! How are you feeling? Have you checked your vital signs lately? Heart rate? Blood pressure? Cholesterol?

I'm asking because of an article recently published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Researchers followed a group of nearly 75,000 people for twenty years, and found that women who went to church more than once a week had a 33% lower risk of dying during the study period than those who never went. These people had higher rates of social support and optimism, lower rates of depression, and were less likely to engage in some key self-destructive behaviors. See? You mother was right. Going to church *is* good for you. And if this study is right, judging by how often I see you, some of you are going to live forever.¹

One might conclude from this study that worship is a fundamentally safe place and involves little risk. I'd like to challenge that assumption.



Worship is – or ought to be – dangerous. It was in the days of King David. The beginning of chapter six, which was not included in our reading for today, describes how the Israelites organized a great big religious festival in order to bring the Ark of the Covenant

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/16/health/religion-lifespan-health/>

into Jerusalem. Things were going along more or less as choreographed when all of a sudden one of the oxen pulling the wagon stumbled a bit, and the lay reader for that day, a man named Uzzah, reached out to grab the Ark. No one is exactly sure what happened here, but the result was that Uzzah was struck dead by the hand of God. Apparently, he thought that it was his place to “manage” God, or that God needed his help in order to stay on track, and God didn’t appreciate that.



Well, nothing takes the wind out of the sails of your church service like having the hand of God smite one of the lay readers, so folks scattered and they tucked the Ark into the garage of a local non-Israelite until someone came up with a better idea.

King David was so scared that he didn’t do anything about it for three months, because that was the day he realized that worship could kill you.

And we read that in 2017 and say, “Wow, I mean, I thought I was going to die of boredom a few times, but nothing like *that* has ever happened around here...”

That may be because we’re more comfortable with the worship that Uzzah was liable to lead. I’m not here to speak ill of the dead, but we all prefer to know what’s going to happen, when it’s going to happen, and how much it’s going to cost. We like worship to be energizing, but even moreso we want God to be predictable and well-managed.

If that’s how we treat our relationship with God, then we’re doing it wrong. The act of worship and the life of the disciple is a wild ride that is fully engaging and utterly transformative. It will change us.

One of the best letters I have ever received came to me from a 12th grade student who had joined me on a short-term mission pilgrimage to the developing world the year before. It was about ten pages, hand written, and in it she dropped the “F--- bomb” more than you might typically think necessary in a letter to one’s pastor. The first four or five pages were angry accusations that our trip to visit the world’s poor had totally screwed up her life and her plans for her senior year. She wrote, “When I returned from that trip I discovered that all of my friends were shallow, self-centered, and materialistic. Worse, I saw that I was all of those things, too. Of course, we were all like that last year, but I didn’t know it. Now, thanks to you and that stupid trip, I know who I am and I know the world I live in and I know some of what God expects of me. All I wanted was to be dumb and happy and enjoy my senior year, but now I keep having big thoughts about how screwed up everyone’s priorities are. And it’s lonely here.”

By the time she got to page ten, she was thanking me for giving her an opportunity to take this trip, but it was a fascinating bit of self-revelation for a young woman to share... God is dangerous and unpredictable, and if we think that showing up in worship is a nice little way to pass the time and maybe impress your boyfriend’s parents, well, we’ve got another thing coming.



²Part of why worship is dangerous is the fact that it reveals to us and to the world who and what we love. In the reading from II Samuel, for instance, David’s wife Michal isn’t participating in worship – she’s watching, from a distance. She was in a prominent place where she’d be *noticed*, but not expected to actually *do* anything. And she comes down hard on her husband for behaving in a way that she thought

² David and Michal in the windows of St. Therese Church in Vasperville, France

compromised his position. She screams at him, “Is this any way for a king to act?”

If you were here last week, you’ll remember that the Hebrew word for “king” is *melek*. The *melek* is the one who has unbridled authority and does what kings do: grab, take, seize, rule... all in their own power.

When Michal challenges David, however, he says, “Yes, I am called to this office... as *nagid* – “prince”. When David was anointed, he was called the *nagid* of YHWH – extending the power and benefits of God’s realm in submission to the God who had called him to service and sacrifice on behalf of God’s people. YHWH is the King; David is the *nagid* who serves at the King’s pleasure.

David realized that the act of worship is a means by which we discover and announce to the world the things that are most important to us.

We say things like this all the time at church, of course. But I’m not sure that we really mean them. You all love that old hymn by Isaac Watts that goes, “Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.” I know you do. We sing several versions of that here.



You know that hymn ends with what musicians call a “whole” note, right? That is, it’s an extended period where we sing the same note and the same word... Unless we’re honest, and we admit that’s where we slide in all of our terms and

conditions...

“Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all...unless it’s opening day of trout season...or my kid is in a Sunday soccer league...or I had a date last night that was really fantastic but it just got too late and...” You see?

That “whole” note allows us the time to tell God what we really mean.

The act of worship is important and defining. In choosing who and what to worship, we allow those things to shape our priorities and practices. Our worship forms our identity.

In 1957 the New York Giants baseball club uprooted itself and moved to San Francisco. The team was losing fans and revenue and the West Coast beckoned alluringly. Reporters asked the team’s owner how he felt about leaving the kids of Manhattan, and he replied, “I feel badly about the kids, but I haven’t seen many of their fathers at games lately.”³ In other words, it’s easy to say “Oh, I’m a big fan”, but unless we’re showing up at the ball park, nothing will change.

So, the choices we make about worship are fraught with meaning and reveal a great deal about not only who we worship, but who we are. The final point I’d like to make about worship this morning is that proper worship makes the world a better place, even for those who do not believe.



⁴When David brings the Ark to Jerusalem, he offers sacrifices of meat and grain. The reading describes how everyone in Israel got a square meal that day. In and through his worship, David blessed both the people of Israel and those in his own home. The things that happened between David and God leaked out of David into the world around him, and that world became a better place because David had been in worship.

³ <http://www.sbnation.com/2012/10/29/3570908/san-francisco-giants-new-york-giants-franchise-moved>

⁴ Detail from the Maciejowski Bible (13th c.). The caption for this image in Latin reads, “How, having completed the sacrifices, David blesses the people, distributing bread and other foods among them.”

There is a great deal of American Christianity that is unsettling to me because we come to worship as consumers. We are feeling a little sad, or wonder about our purpose in life might be, or are afraid of our own mortality, and we think, “You know what? I’m going to get myself to church. That will make me feel better.” And it does. We come out, we sit with our friends and we sing some perky songs; the pastor gives us a nice little pep talk and I feel better about my life. Worship is a refuge. A sanctuary. An escape.

We all need that from time to time, and there’s nothing wrong with feeling at home with or encouraged by worship. But the main goal in worship is *not* to make *you* happy. Some years ago a fellow pastor told me that as he was greeting people after worship, folks were walking by exchanging the usual niceties. One woman, though, took him by the arm and said, “Pastor, that was a very moving service. I must say, however, that I did not care for the second hymn – not one little bit.” The pastor replied, “Well, then, how fortunate for everyone that we didn’t come here this morning to worship *you*.” That man knew the truth: the main aim of worship is to point to God and to seek to shape ourselves to become more and more the people God intends us to be for the good of the created order.

When we give our hearts and minds to God, our lives will reflect the things of God. To put it another way, your neighbor’s life should be better because you are here worshipping this morning. If the things that we do and the ways that we do them on Sunday mornings do not lead to this neighborhood knowing more of God’s love and grace and blessing, then we ought to pack up and go home and try something else.

When David worshiped God, the people around him were blessed. Does that happen in your home? On your

street? In your workplace? At your school? What difference does any of this make to the people who have never been here?

If we do this right, more children will be coached and mentored and loved because we've been here. The lonely will be visited, the poor will be fed, and those who would abuse their power or authority will be challenged.

This story about David and his dancing before the Lord is not here to impress on us what a great guy David was. It's here to demonstrate how powerful and awesome David thought God was – and how far-reaching the implications of that were for David and for those who surrounded him. Frederick Buechner describes this well in his brief essay on David:



With trumpets blaring and drums beating, it was Camelot all over again, and for once that royal young redhead didn't have to talk up the bright future and the high hopes, because he was himself the future at its brightest and there were no hopes higher than the ones his people had in him. And for once he didn't have to drag God in for politics' sake either, because it was obvious to everybody that this time God was there on his own. How they cut loose together, David and Yahweh, whirling around before the ark in such a passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in a single flame of such magnificence that not even the dressing-down David got from Michal afterward could dim the glory of it.

He had feet of clay like the rest of us, if not more so - self-serving and deceitful, lustful and vain - but on the basis of that dance alone, you can see why it was David more than anybody else that Israel lost its heart

to and why, when Jesus of Nazareth came riding into Jerusalem on his flea-bitten mule a thousand years later, it was as the Son of David that they hailed him.⁵

I hope and pray that your participation in worship this morning, this month, this year, does more for you than lower your blood pressure and pep you up. My prayer is that this practice of worship would ignite in you a holy fire so that you, and we together, might be a blessing to the world because of all that God has done in and for the likes of people such as we. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ *Peculiar Treasures* (Harper & Row, 1979), p. 23-24).