

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2010

Imagining Worship

Revelation 7:9-17

After a church service on Sunday morning,
a young boy suddenly announced to his mother,
“Mom, I’ve decided to become a minister when I grow up.”
“Okay,” said his mother, a bit startled. “What made you decide this?”
“Well,” said the boy, “I have to go to church on Sunday anyway,
and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell
than to sit there and listen!”

That’s a commendable bit of logic for a young fellow.
And do you want to know why I like it so much?
Because of the premise:

the little boy assumes that he *has* to go to church every Sunday!
Apparently, the little boy hasn’t figured out is that he no longer *has* to do that.
He must not realize that he’s living in the year 2010,
when so much of the Christian population in the Western world
finds worship a nice thing to do once, or maybe even twice, a month,
rather than an indispensable part of their week,
let alone, of every day - and those are the active churchgoers!

Now, since you are here in church today,
you are either wholeheartedly agreeing with me about this,
or you may be feeling a little guilty,
or you’re here for the first time in 8 weeks and a little irritated
at my rigid, old-fashioned, puritanical views about Sunday worship.
Here, you’ve finally managed to get here,
and I blast you with a “where have you been?!?”
Do I not have any idea how busy people are these days?
Sundays are the only time we have to rest and be with the family,
or to catch up on....whatever....

The reality of our cultural demise was driven home to me again this week
when I heard that the CHURCH softball league in which GPC is playing
now schedules its first game at 12:45 on Sundays!
When you consider that teams like to arrive early to warm up
and that the home team is responsible for field prep,
and assuming they will want some lunch
and don’t plan to play ball in their church clothes,
the math on this doesn’t exactly add up in favor of worship attendance.

Now, this is no reflection on our team players or manager who don't set the schedule -
but a few of us pastors are a little irritated.

I'd like to think that the league's rationale
was that most churches offer an early service that their players could attend,
but I'm not that optimistic.

Going through the church directory I count 320 regular worshippers,
that's not including the unconfirmed children who are here regularly.
They probably make it about 350

That's 350 individuals who I see in worship over any give 6 or 8 week period.

On a good Sunday (not including Easter or Christmas)
we probably have a little over 200 people in worship.

That means that on a regular basis 120-150, or about 40%,
of our worshipping congregation
stays home, travels, or has planned something else during worship.

After hearing about the softball schedule,

I was in a bit of state as I started writing this sermon,
and was reminded of the little girl who was watching her father, a pastor,
write his sermon.

"How do you know what say, daddy?" she asked.

"Why, sweetie, God tells me."

"Oh," she replied. "Then why do you keep crossing things out?"

When it comes to the topic of worship attendance in America's mainline churches
there are a lot of lines I have to cross out
to make the sermon fit for the pulpit.

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Today's reading from Revelation

brings us into the throne room of God and of the risen, exalted Christ,
and portrays the worship of the multitudes who will gather there
at the end of time, when all will be glory and joy
and all creation will burst forth in spontaneous song
and will bask in the eternal loving light of God.

It is this scene that provides the eternal archetype, the heavenly model,
for our worship together as the church on earth and in history.

It is also an image, unfortunately, that is often taken a bit too literally
and unimaginatively.

It's why poor, bored, yawning children (and adults)

wonder if going to heaven simply means floating around in the clouds
singing old hymns and listening to some old geezer drone on in the pulpit.

But pay attention to this throne room scene:

*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation,
from all tribes and peoples and languages,
standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.*

*They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne,
and to the Lamb!"*

Remember, palm branches are a sign of victory!
And this multitude isn't singing any pathetic song
that the pastor picked because he liked the words
but had no idea that the hymn tune is totally unsingable.

No, rather, it's more like this...

Picture Heinz Field after a playoff victory that sends the Steelers to the Super Bowl.
Picture the Pens fans after the goal that wins the Stanley Cup.
Picture the Pirates...well, scratch that.

Or better yet: picture this multitude gathered from every nation.
Where does that happen on earth these days?
Every four years in the summer and in the winter?
So imagine the closing ceremony of the Olympic games,
in which everyone has received a gold medal, even the crowd,
and the whole multitude suddenly realizes that
they are all on the same team,
all fellow-citizens of the One Nation.

This is a victory celebration.

*These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*
Imagine your greatest ordeal.

Visualize your most agonizing moment of pain,
or some season of your life you thought you would never survive,
and then picture everything working out,
like the last scene of your favorite happy-ending movie.

This is how worship in heaven will feel - this will be our reality!

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

Just imagine how beautiful that day - that eternal day - will be.

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It is this final scene of victory that we enact every time we gather for worship.
When we proclaim the dying and rising of Christ in baptism,
When we lift the cup of salvation in the Eucharist,
When we speak and sing the words of the Gospel together,
or our hearts thrill at a moving piece of music sung by the choir,
or we share signs of the peace of Christ,
we are enacting that victory and living it together.

Our lives are no longer stuck in the *past*, weighed down by the chains of sin and failure,
nor are we totally defined by or *present* fretful circumstances,
or by the fears that plague us about our earthly *future*,
because we know that whatever our earthly past, present, or future may hold,
we are being led by our good and faithful shepherd
to the springs of the water of life,
where we will be washed clean from the stains of our wandering
and refreshed with cool, clear water
and where all will be well
in the presence of God.

With such refreshing, living water available to us,
why do people persist in living in the desert where there is nothing to drink?

Do you know the definition of a desert?
A desert is, simply, a region in which there is more evaporation than precipitation.
Friends, you don't need to be told how much life evaporates from our souls
as we trudge through the sands of our existence.
There is not enough precipitation to fill our cups.
But there is a well, a spring of living water - the water of life given by our Shepherd.

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There was an old Zen master who said with frustration to his students in meditation:
"If you're going to stand, stand.
Or if you're going to sit, sit.
But don't wobble!"

That's what I want to say to Christians about worship.
If you're going to follow Christ, then follow Christ.
If you're going to be a secular atheist, then be a secular atheist.
But with this half in, half out business, there is a lot of self-deception going on.
Perhaps we're trying to have it all - but we only have so much life energy to give.
We have to make choices about what's ultimately good for us.

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You may have heard the story someone shared with me on the internet recently.

A member of a certain church,
 who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going.
After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him.

It was a chilly evening.
The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.
Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit,
 the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace,
 and waited.

The pastor made himself at home but said nothing.
In the grave silence,
 he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs.
After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs,
 carefully picked up a brightly burning ember,
 and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone;
 then he sat back in his chair, still silent.

The host watched all this in quiet contemplation.
As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished,
 there was a momentary glow,
 and then its fire was no more.
 Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting.
The pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave.
He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember,
 and placed it back in the middle of the fire.

Immediately it began to glow,
 once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave,
 his host said with a tear running down his cheek,
'Thank you, pastor. I will be back in church next Sunday.'

I may have crossed a lot of my human frustration out of this sermon.
But there is one thing I *know* God wants me to say.
Jesus is inviting you and me out of the dark valley
 and into green pastures and still waters.

Say it with me, if you would like
 ...and imagine yourself being led to the waters by the Good Shepherd...

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.*