

Sermon for The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2020
The Rev. Jenny Scott
Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira NY

Journeying the Way of Love through Lent - Worship

Have you ever found yourself so in awe of God--so caught up in a moment--that your heart leaps, your mind expands, and even your body responds in some way?



One time, I was in a Kauri forest in New Zealand. Kauri are equivalent to the Red Woods of the west coast of the USA. Some are at least 1500 years old and they stand tall and majestic with their dappled-colored bark. I was so caught up in the beauty and wonder of a Kauri tree, that I could not help but hug it. And in that moment I was prompted to praise God the Creator.

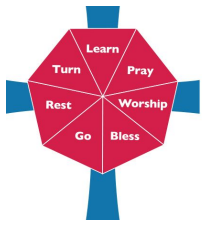
Another time, I was soaring under a parachute 3000 feet high, gliding over the autumn trees. I was so caught up in the sense of flight and the beauty around me that I impulsively broke out in a classic contemporary worship song. (Much to my chagrin, I later learned that everyone on the ground could hear me).

Then there was one time I was at a Dave Matthews concert and Dave broke out in a 10 minute improv rift, singing the word “Hallelujah” over and over again. The crowd of 1000s all say along. In that moment it felt like I was transported to someplace fuller and richer than a simple rock concert.

And then, there was the first time I ever participated in a Anglo-Catholic mass. I was surprised to find how easy it was for me to become aware of the thin space that existed there. I experienced the involvement of my entire self being drawn into worship: the smells of the incense, the sounds of the music and bells, the practices of kneeling and genuflecting, the sights of the 14 stations of the cross lining the walls, and the taste of the communion bread and wine. This little Presbyterian girl had never experienced this type of corporate worship and yet I was able to focus on the Holiness of God in a new way.

I venture to guess that most, if not all, of us have had moments in our lives where we are so caught up in the mystery of God that we find ourselves spontaneously reverencing God in our hearts, minds, and bodies. Sometimes we just can't help but be moved to worship our Great God.

Throughout Lent, I've been inviting the community here at Grace Episcopal Church in Elmira NY to Journey with the larger Episcopal community along the Way of Love, a set of seven practices that draw us closer to Jesus Christ. This week, the practice is Worship. The practice is defined as:



“Gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and dwell with God. When we worship, we gather with others before God. We hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to God. As we break bread, our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body, the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love.”¹

I am finding it hard to speak of corporate worship when we are unable to physically come together to be a worshiping community in one place and time. If I’m honest, up until a few weeks ago, I was generally opposed to streaming worship services, because I felt that being in community was of central importance to our times of worship. But things are different at the moment. And while I look forward to the big celebration we will have when we can join together in person for worship, I am also aware that we are still worshiping our God as one community, even when we are not physically together. And so this current situation challenges me to re-examine what worship is.

I would like to suggest that first and foremost worship is the using of our full bodies to reverence God. The words that we proclaim, the incense we burn, the hymns we sing are all acts of devotion. But let’s be honest, God doesn’t need a pep rally or a bunch of cheerleaders. God does not need our praise.

So why do we come to worship? It is not so much so God knows how great God is. But it is so we are reminded again and again how Great God is. It helps us to remember that God is God. And through the reverence, adoration, and participation we then in return receive blessings.

Worship allows us to move away from being focused on ourselves, and redirect us towards God. Worship re-centers us.

Worship allows us to find the nourishment through the Word and Sacraments that then equips us as we go back out into the world to be Christ’s body. Worship re-energizes us.

Worship allows us to hear God’s call on our lives, instructing us on how to Love God and Neighbor. Worship re-orientes us.

Worship allows us the space to detach ourselves from all that sucks life from us so that we can experience the truth-- that we dwell with God. Worship re-stores us.

It is this idea of restoring that I would like to look at more closely this morning as we take a brief look at the reading from the Prophet Ezekiel.²

First a little background: Ezekiel is writing from Babylon. He and the Israelite people are in exile. Their city, and the temple within, are destroyed. Their civilization as they know it has been permanently

¹ <https://episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/practice/worship>

² [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)



disrupted. The promise given to their forefathers--that they would be a great nation, seems to have come to an end.

What is there to hope for? Even Ezekiel, a chosen prophet, seems to be without hope. One minute he records God's promise and then he has visions of death. First he hears the words from God: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; ... Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God."³ Then right after this promise he has a vision of dry bones.⁴

These aren't just any dry bones. Ezekiel is brought to a valley, a battlefield where Israelite soldiers have been killed at the hands of the Babylonians, and their remains have not been properly cared for. These were Ezekiel's brothers, gone forever. To say this is an awful sight, is an understatement.

What kind of hope can grow out of so much disappear? Ezekiel has heard God's promises of a new heart and spirit, of new life, but when he faces this scene, Ezekiel surely does not know how it can ever come to be.

God asks Ezekiel if he believes. Does he have faith enough that even in such extreme death, new life can come about? Can these bones truly live? Ezekiel asks himself, How can they? All that is left are the bones. So his response to God is rather noncommittal: "O Lord God, you know." But God sees through Ezekiel's weak answer and challenges him again. Now Ezekiel is asked to not only believe that they can live but to be the words that call them back to life. Ezekiel is being asked to participate with God in what is about to happen.

Ezekiel takes stock of what is at risk. He is being asked to do something, that if others witnessed, would be deemed foolish. Is he willing to be caught a fool? Ezekiel realizes things can't get much worse than they already are, so he speaks the words.

This is when the really crazy things start to happen. The bones start to rattle. There is a subtle noise, a soft clicking and clattering as the bones come together. Then tendons and muscles are added. Then the skin covers over the surface. The bones were being transformed right in front of Ezekiel's eyes. They are being returned into the shape of the individual brothers who had died. They are no longer one large mess of dry, wasted bones, but individual bodies. Next Ezekiel is instructed to call the wind of God from the four corners of the world, to come together and become the breath that brings life into each body, making them living beings once again.

³ Ezekiel 36:26-38

⁴ Photo attribution: Elkan, Benno, 1877-1960. Ezekiel in the Valley of the Dry Bones, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=55841> [retrieved March 29, 2020]. Original source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collantes,_Francisco_-_The_Vision_of_Ezekiel_-_1630.jpg.

How was this possible? What could this vision possibly mean? How can new life grow from such a place of despair? To Ezekiel, it is a vision to restore his hope. It is the promises that God has made to the Israelite people all the way back to Abraham, will be upheld. New life will spring forth, even out of death.

As we face the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is in a place of despair and seemingly hopelessness. We look at the media and we are aware of death, scarcity of resources, and uncertain future. Does it feel like we are Ezekiel, looking over a valley of dry bones? Do we hold the faith to participate with God, to act like fools, calling for re-creation out of death?

Or maybe we feel like we are the dry bones and long for the spirit to move through us with new life. Breath of life, breathe on us. Restore us. Make us whole.

I believe that acts of worship can open us to the Holy Spirit to move through us, restoring our beings. Even though worship looks different today, as we are not physically with one another during this time, let us continue spending time in worship with God, finding ways to Thank, Praise, and Dwell with God. If God can turn a skydive or a rock concert into a time of worship, surely God can help us realize that family prayer times, Facebook LiveStreams, and phone calls between friends can all become places where we can get caught up in worshipping God.

This time may be a great opportunity to pause, ask what about worship honors God-- giving God the reverence due God. And explore what in worship restores our souls. What in worship becomes the Breath of God blowing in and through each of us until we are no longer dry bones, but a restored people?

A prayer from our BCP:

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.