

**"Worship Is a Dangerous Act"**  
**Sermon Series on *Worship Is!* #5**  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**February 8, 2015**  
**(Mic. 6:6-8)**

**Introduction.**

Ash Wednesday is coming up in just a few days. It's always a very powerful service of worship which Christians have celebrated for many centuries as a way of beginning the season of Lent.

I'm reminded of an Ash Wednesday service a number of years ago which took place at a previous church where I did something pretty dangerous. I decided to try something new and different for that service and begin a new tradition. Along the way we introduced pyrotechnics for the first time in worship in that church, and it got a little out of hand.

During the service we came to a point where there was a time for the confession of sin, and we had everyone take a moment for reflection and write on a small piece of paper any sin they wished to confess to God. Then, during the singing of an anthem, the ushers collected the pieces of paper in the offering plates, and at the end of it our head usher brought all the pieces of paper forward. I took the papers, poured them into an urn, struck a match, and set them on fire. We intended this to be a dramatic moment when we could experience the refining fire of God's grace as our sins were burned before our very eyes.

That's when the excitement began. There were so many pieces of paper from the congregation it was difficult to get all of them to fit into the urn and catch on fire. As a result smoke began to rise and fill the sanctuary. It wasn't long before the cloud of smoke was so thick that the fire alarms went off in the building, and the strobe lights and sirens began to do their thing. Our facilities manager bolted out of his pew and tried to shut them off. I've never seen him move so fast in my life! All the while, the smoke kept billowing out of the urn and filling the sanctuary. It was then that I said, "Well, it appears there's more sin in this congregation than I realized!" We all had a good laugh, the facilities manager got the alarm shut off, and we were able to continue with the service. But it did make for a memorable Ash Wednesday I will never forget. Someone even wrote about it in the newspaper the next day.

Let me assure you I don't have any plans for dangerous pyrotechnics today, and you won't see any new innovations this morning. But I do hope that what we do today will in fact be somewhat dangerous. Because whenever we come into the presence of God, we are engaging in a dangerous act. Let me explain what I mean.

## **I. The Dangerous Act of Worship.**

Worship is dangerous, and the reason it's dangerous is because if God is truly the holy, all powerful, sovereign Lord of the universe we believe Him to be, then to come into His presence and engage in a conversation with Him should be one of the most sobering experiences we can have. People in the Bible who encountered the Lord fell on their faces, they were shaken to their core, and they realized just how unworthy and sinful they really were. Just ask Isaiah, or Jonah, or the apostle Paul. They all worshipped God, and it changed their lives.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Dillard writes, "It is madness to wear [hats] to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may [a]wake someday and take offence, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return [again]." <sup>1</sup>

I think something has gone wrong with worship today. All too often it's become a place of safety and complacency, a narrowly defined private comfortable experience in which we express our personal praise to God. Even when we gather corporately, we often close our eyes to those around us, focusing only on the Lord and ignoring our neighbor. But, as I shared with you last week, true biblical worship doesn't merely point us upward; it should turn us outward as well. <sup>2</sup> It did Jesus, and it should us, too. Worship should move us beyond our comfort zones to join God on His mission of love for a lost and broken world.

In his book *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, from which I borrowed the title of my sermon, my friend Mark Labberton writes: "...the God we seek is the God we want, not the God who is. We fashion a god who blesses without obligation, who lets us feel His presence without living His life, who stands with us and never against us, who gives us what we want, when we want it. We worship a god of consumer satisfaction, hoping the talismans of guitars and candles or organs and liturgy will put us in touch with God as we want him to be. The real danger in encountering the living God is like the difference between the gentle wind of our imaginations and the whirlwind of God's unmatched power and authority. Both involve air in motion, but the two experiences are in no way the same." <sup>3</sup>

The history of the nation of Israel is an amazing story of the faithfulness of God in spite of all the unfaithfulness of His people. Time and time again, the Jews wandered from the Lord and sought the protection and comfort of other gods. They were asleep to this reality, and God tried to wake them up through the prophets. One of the most dramatic periods of their history came about because of the nation's failure to live its worship, and God's criticism of the Jews in that time was that they failed to live what they professed to believe. The people went through the

outward motions of worship, but they didn't live out what worship was meant to show.<sup>4</sup>

The Old Testament prophet Micah distilled Israel's call at that critical time in the passage we've read this morning: *"With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"* (Mic. 6:6-8).

Worship should wake up the reality of the presence of God in our lives, and it should stir us to respond to the call of God to the world. In a documentary about *Mother Teresa*, a priest who had known the Albanian nun from her early days said, "People say Mother Teresa went to Calcutta and was moved by the plight of all those she saw in need and felt called to respond. That was not it at all! She knew the love of Jesus, and it was specifically because of that love that she responded as she did." Worship changed Mother Teresa, and the consequence of her worship changed the world.

## **II. The Transforming Power of the Worship of God.**

The measure of my worship is the fruit of character and action that impacts my life to such an extent that it looks more like the character and action of Jesus. If our worship doesn't transform us into the likeness of Christ and stir us to be about the business of Jesus, then all we've done when we gather to worship is to be entertained, or to attend a nice social event where we get to see our friends again. However, if we have an authentic encounter with the living God of the universe through the person of Jesus Christ in the power of His Spirit, we can't go away unaffected or unchanged.

The rhythm of worship is the re-centering of our lives upon the Lord Jesus Christ where the things of this world assume their true size. It gives us an opportunity

- to praise God,
- to name the sins that bind us,
- to find forgiveness and release,
- to hear a good word from God for daily living,

and to be sent forth into the world in the power of God's Spirit so we can be agents of grace. We gather to worship in order to depart and serve. When that happens, we find ourselves on an adventure. God becomes real, the needs of others become a priority, and the Lord leads us on a journey to places and people we never could have imagined before.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago, I received a note from a young woman in my previous congregation who was involved in the university ministry of our church. Lorie and I helped sponsor her to go to Thailand one Christmas break, on a short-term mission trip, and she was writing to tell us about her experiences. She responded to God's call to go on this trip during a worship service. I want to share some of the note with you.

She writes, "Thank you so much for making it possible for me to go to Thailand! It was one of the most life-changing events in my life.... I got to spend 2.5 weeks with 60 other students who all became close friends by the end. We ate everything from fried cockroaches to chicken feet! ...We had nightly devotions on the beach with the waves, and played with little kids on our backs all day. We built almost everything imaginable out of concrete and tried to take instruction in Thai on how to do it. We got to worship with Thai and Burmese people in the same room whose relationships with one another are at their worst. We rode elephants and played with monkeys, we enjoyed a boat ride among the Thai cliffs, and we taught the Hokey Pokey to a whole school, all in the same day. It was a trip full of new experiences.

"I began to comprehend how good God is on this trip, and He transformed something as terrifying as a tsunami into a positive change. The destruction not only shed light onto the arising physical needs but also the spiritual needs that existed long before the storm. Hearing them talk of their survival of the tsunami brought it so much closer to home. Realizing that God is constant from today to tomorrow, from America to Thailand, allowed me to trust Him at a whole new level. If He can handle the tsunami, He has the power to do anything. I am learning how to follow His lead and trust Him more every day. Thailand impacted my view of the world, and it impacted my faith immensely. Thanks again! Love you guys, Allison."

That's what the dangerous act of worship can do for a person. It takes you on an adventure of faith and leads you to follow Jesus more closely like never before.

### **III. The Dangerous Act of Jesus.**

When Jesus showed up on Palm Sunday, there was danger written all over His arrival. It was the time of Passover, and the whole city of Jerusalem was filled with people. They were pilgrims who had traveled from all over the world to celebrate one of the most sacred feasts in the Jewish year. Jesus could not have chosen a more dramatic moment to tell the world who He really was, and He came into a city that was surging with people who were hyped up with religious expectations.

The Bible tells us that when the Lord entered the temple area that day, a sorry spectacle greeted His eyes and ears. The temple was being desecrated, and it

looked like a Middle Eastern marketplace. And business was booming. People were buying and selling, and money changers were in the temple precincts, sitting cross-legged behind their little coin-covered tables, overcharging the poor, and ripping people off.

Outraged by what He saw, our Lord directed His holy anger both in word and deed against those who were exploiting people in the name of religion. Christ's actions expressed His deep indignation at the flagrant violation of God's intended purpose for the temple. It was to be a house of worship and prayer, but they had made it into a den of robbers.

The cleansing of the temple was a dangerous act of worship. It was born out of Christ's devotion to the Father and His desire to see people worship in a manner that doesn't exploit others. Whenever we begin to see who God really is and who it is He calls us to be as His followers, our lives will take on a radical dimension. We can no longer simply live for ourselves and pursue the "good life." We can no longer just go along with the crowd and be content with the status quo.

True worship of God wakes us up from our sleep, it sets us on a path of faith which takes us on a journey, and it calls us to stand up for righteousness and truth in the face of injustice whenever and wherever we find it. It did for Micah, it did for Jesus, and it should for you and me as well.

#### **IV. An Example of the Dangerous Act of Worship.**

William Wilberforce became a follower of Christ as a young man, and then he became a member of Parliament at the age of 21. Pretty remarkable. A few years later in 1783, one of his college friends, William Pitt, led his party to power, and as the new prime minister he began to form a new cabinet. Wilberforce was rumored to be among the candidates for a cabinet post, because he and Pitt were friends. Soon Wilberforce became preoccupied with the possibility, and for days the thought of this dominated his waking hours. Ambition was crippling his soul.

Wilberforce went to church to worship on Sunday, as was his regular habit. And in that service, God spoke to William's heart. Wilberforce wrote in his journal later that day, "Blessed be to God for the day of rest and religious occupation wherein earthly things assume their true size. Ambition is stunted."<sup>5</sup>

Wilberforce wasn't selected to become a member of the new cabinet. Instead, God called him to a more important task – to lead the effort to abolish slavery in the British Isles. He responded to that call with faithfulness and tenacity for many years until, just before he died in 1833, Parliament voted to outlaw the slave trade in the British Isles forever. Worship has the power to transform your life, if you let it.

## **Conclusion.**

Many years ago, my wife Lorie attended the Urbana Missions Conference on the campus of the University of Illinois. It was sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She joined with 17,000 college students and young adults from all over the country to hear the message of God's love for a lost and broken world and the invitation to join Him on His mission of love. Every plenary session had a worship service attached to it, and she remembers the power and presence of the Holy Spirit whenever 17,000 people sang praise to God together. It was amazing.

The last night on New Year's Eve at a closing service of communion, a speaker asked the crowd if after hearing God's call to world missions they were willing to go wherever God might choose to send them. Lorie was one of the thousands who stood up and raised her hand, and her life has never been the same since. It's one of the reasons she has had such a passion for children in poverty around the world all these years, and it's why, until just recently, she was working for Samaritan's Purse.

One of the speakers at that conference who impacted Lorie the most was a woman named Elizabeth Elliot. She spoke about the glory of God's will. In her message Elizabeth told a story that has stayed with Lorie to this day. This morning I close with it.

"High in the mountains of North Wales in a place called Llanymawddwy, lives a shepherd named John Jones with his wife Mari and his black and white dog Mack. I stood one misty summer morning in the window of their farmhouse watching John on horseback herding the sheep with Mack.... Mack, a champion Scottish collie, was in his glory. He came from a long line of working dogs, and he had sheep in his blood. This was what he was made for, this was what he was trained to do....

"Do the sheep have any idea what's happening?" I asked Mari. 'Not a clue!' she said. 'And how about Mack?' I can't forget Mari's answer: 'The dog doesn't understand the pattern - only obedience.'

"...In that Welsh pasture in the cool of that summer morning, what I saw was far more than blind obedience. I saw acted out... two creatures who were in the fullest sense 'in their glory.' A man who had given his life to sheep, who loved them and loved his dog, and a dog whose trust in that man was absolute, whose obedience was instant and unconditional, and whose very meat and drink was to do the will of his master. He never stopped wagging his tail. 'I delight to do thy will,' was what Mack said, 'Yea thy law is within my heart.'"<sup>6</sup>

To worship Jesus means that we will glory in the will of God. It is the dangerous act of worship. When we encounter the Lord, we can never be the same again. How will you respond to the call of God this morning? In what way will

you be different in the coming week? How has your encounter with Christ and the people of God this morning changed you? May we take what we've heard and experienced today in the dangerous act of worship and live it out for the sake of Christ and in service to the world. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the back cover of Mark Labberton's book *The Dangerous Act of Worship*.

<sup>3</sup> Labberton, p. 66. I'm indebted to Mark for some of the ideas in this sermon, and I commend his excellent book to you.

<sup>4</sup> Labberton, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Garth Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 89

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Elliot, "The Glory of God's Will" in *Declare His Glory Among The Nations*, pp.129-131.