

“The Presence of God in Worship”
April 28, 2019

Key Texts: Hebrews 10.23-25; Acts 20.7; Revelation 1.10; Matthew 18.20; James 1.19; Habakkuk 2.20; Exodus 14.14; Psalm 46.10

Key Words: Engagement, Worship, Life with God, Sabbath, Lord’s Day, Thin Place, Omnipresent, Play

Summary: What if we recognized that God is in the room? What if we recognized that worship is a dialogue, not a monologue? What if people came expecting “church”, and “worship” broke out!

You’re back! How cool is that?! Did you know that Easter Sunday, last week, was the biggest Sunday ever here at Capital City? 1500 people chose to celebrate Easter here with us last Sunday. That was incredible! And it was a great worship service. And we had three baptisms - on Easter Sunday. And we wrapped up the series we’ve been in since January: Making a Messiah. In fact, we think Easter is the final piece of evidence. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God was telling us - with crystal clarity - “This Jesus is my Son. He’s no liar, he’s no lunatic, he’s your Savior and he’s your Lord. Don’t you dare blow him off!” And pretty much our Easter services were our attempt to tell God, “Yes Sir!”

But ... what does that mean, practically? I acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. I have accepted him as my Savior, because I’m willing to admit I need one. And I have called him my Lord, my Master, my God. Have you? ... Well ... what does that mean? If it’s more than just words - because words are cheap - what does that really mean? Well ... what it means is this: It’s not about you anymore. It’s not about me, and it’s not about you.

Almost 20 years ago a great pastor named Rick Warren wrote a powerful book called “The Purpose Driven Life.” Here’s how he opens the book. He says, “It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness.” Well that’s kind of rude, isn’t it! He says, “It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions.” Talk about counter-cultural! That kind of flies in the face of what we hear every day! He says, “If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his

purpose and for his purpose.” Huh ... Do you buy that? Well, if you call Jesus the Messiah, your Savior, your Lord ... you do! It’s not about you! And if that’s true ... you will never, ever really be content as long as you think it’s all ... about you. You see, most people live for too little. Our lives are too small. As long as it’s all about me, I’ll live a petty little life. But if it’s about him

There’s a phrase we’re been using here at CapCity for a while. We talk about doing life with God, for God, God’s way. We want to do life with God, for God, God’s way. And again, that’s flat out counter-cultural. Because what we hear them tell us is this: It’s my life; and it’s about what I like, and what I want, and what I need. Well, that’s not our way! Jesus following is about doing life with God, for God, God’s way. Do you buy that? It’s a shift in trajectories, a fundamental change in how we do life. And it affects ... everything!

- What do you think it looks like in a marriage: to do life with God, for God, God’s way? Do you think living that out would change the way some of you husbands are treating your wives, or the way some of you wives are treating your husbands. I guarantee it! By the way, we’ll be exploring what that means in a few weeks, right after Mother’s Day.
- What do you think it looks like for parents, to do life with God, for God, God’s way ... as a dad, or a mom? Or what do you think it looks like for a kid to do life with God, for God, God’s way? This is for you kids, too! Do you think that might change the way parents treat their kids, and the way kids treat their parents? It would revolutionize our families, guys!
- What do you think it looks like at school, or at your job: to do life with God, for God, God’s way? I’m pretty sure that if we actually tried living it out, we’d look pretty weird, but we’d make pretty good friends, and neighbors, and colleagues.
- Or how do you think it changes the way we use our money: to do life with God, for God, God’s way; or the way we spend our “free time”; or the way we treat our friends, and our neighbors, and even our “enemies.”

You see, we buy it: It’s not about me! It’s not my life; it’s not about what I want, what I like, what I need. I don’t want to settle for the

petty little self-absorbed life that leads to. It's about doing life with God, for God, God's way ... the kind of life I was created to live! Because listen guys, this is huge: There are really only two options. It's either: It's my life! It's about me: what I want, what I like, what I need. Or, It's not about me. It's about doing life with God, for God, God's way. Now, which option - which one - do you think will make your life better, and will make you better at life?

Well ... all that stuff kind of sets the table for what this sermon is really about this morning. I want us to think about worship this morning: Worship. 1500 of us gathered here last week to do what ... worship? Well, did we get it done? Probably between 800 and 900 of us will gather here this morning to ... worship? Are we going to get it done? Is that why you're here? I hope it is, for most of you. Well, what does that mean? What does that look like?

I'm going to kind of slip back into my Professor mode for a few minutes. I wasn't trained to be a preacher - that's kind of obvious; I was trained to teach - to teach Bible. And I did that for quite a few years ... till they fired me, for being a bit too controversial. That's how I ended up here. Anyway, part of the rhythm of doing life with God, for God, God's way has always been weekly, corporate worship; weekly, corporate worship. You can worship God all by yourself. We are supposed to worship God all by ourselves. But part of God's design for every one of us has always been weekly, corporate worship. We get together to give him the honor and the praise he deserves, and to put ourselves in a place where we are more receptive to the nudges of his Spirit.

In the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, the old way to do life with God, for God, God's way, it was the Sabbath. It's one of the 10 commandments, one of the big 10: Commandment #4 - "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." (Exodus 20) Sabbath is just the Hebrew word for "seventh," the 7th day - our Saturday. So, for thousands of years Jews have been gathering together on Saturdays to worship God. That's the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, the old way to do life with God, for God, God's way. For us Jesus followers it's Sunday. The first day of the week. (John 20.1) Do you know why? Because of Easter! Sunday is the day our Messiah rose from the dead. (Acts 20.7) So, we started calling it, "The Lord's Day." And the early Christians started

meeting together every Lord's day - every Sunday - to remember, to worship. The Old Testament - the Old Covenant, it was Saturday; the New Testament - the New Covenant - for us Jesus followers, it's Sunday. We didn't pick Sundays because it was on the weekend; we picked Sunday because that's the day the world changed, that's the day our Christ won our freedom!

(Revelation 1.10 NLT) And ever since, on the first day of every week, we Jesus followers cluster together to give God the honor and the praise he deserves, and to put ourselves in a place where we are more receptive to the niggles of his Spirit. And this is huge to us. Listen to what we are told in our New Testament, the New Covenant. It says, "Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise." It says, "Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works." Because we need that kind of motivation and encouragement! And it says - here it is: "And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, (as some Jesus followers are still doing) but encourage one another..." (Hebrews 10.23-25) Guys, it's part of doing life with God, for God, God's way. It's part of Jesus following! We worship God out there, on our own ... because he deserves it. And we make it a priority to get together on the first day of every week ... to do ... what?

(Headlines on screen) Now, a lot of people who call themselves Jesus followers don't buy it! Because, I think, they don't get it. It's a cultural trend right now. More and more people are pushing God away - especially our kids. And more and more Jesus followers are pushing weekly, corporate worship away - especially our kids. It doesn't take a lot of digging to see the trends. The Jesus followers who used to go to church every week have scaled it back to 2 or 3 times a month. The Jesus followers who used to go to church 2 or 3 times a month have reduced it to once or twice a month. And ... so on. Churches actually have to grow to stay even! So, most churches are falling back!

In part, I think, because we've forgotten why we're here. Listen guys: Corporate worship is not about me. It's not about what I want, what I like, what I need. It's about doing life with God, for God, God's way. And I'm not talking about ... "religion." I think most Jesus followers kind of see Sundays as "religion." They see it as kind of an obligation. They

are thinking, “There are better things I could be doing, but this is one of those boxes I guess I have to check off if I want to be a Jesus follower. We treat it like it’s a duty, it’s an ought, it’s a should. So, it’s a chore. “It’s a beautiful day: I could be fishing or playing golf!” Or, “It’s a dreary day: I could be in bed! It’s the weekend; I need a little me-time, right? Or a little family time, right?” Because usually when go to church we don’t ... really ... worship. We’re lost the mystery! We sing the songs, and pray the prayers, and listen to some guy who never knows when to quit, but we don’t really ... worship.

Now, when I teach people about God I usually teach them some big words. God is transcendent: which means, he stands above, he transcends. He’s not part of creation, he’s the creator. And God is imminent: he didn’t just create the world and then sit there, watching, disinterestedly. He’s active, in creation, every day. And God is omniscient: which means he knows everything knowable. And he is omnipotent: which means he can do anything doable. And God is omnipresent: which means, God is everywhere. He is not limited to a body, like us. So, there is nowhere you’ve ever been, there is nowhere you’ll ever be where God is not. Jesus said, “I’ll be with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28) And we believe that. When you become a Jesus follower he plants the Holy Spirit inside you. Which means God is with you, he is in you 24-7. Do you buy that?

If that’s so, what does he mean when he says, “Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18.20) Well, duh! He’s omnipresent, right? But that’s Jesus talking. He says, “Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.” Well, of course he is! He’s everywhere, right? If you’re a Jesus follower, he’s inside you, right? He’s always with you, 24-7, everywhere. So, what’s he saying? I think he’s saying that when Jesus followers cluster as Jesus followers, something special happens. At least it’s supposed to. Have you ever been to a place where religion morphed into worship? Have you ever done it? Have you ever transformed a church service into worship? That is on you, you know.

We were talking about this stuff last Monday in worship planning meeting when Tater mentioned the phrase “thin places.” I hadn’t heard the phrase before, so I went digging. Apparently, the early Celtic Christians

talked about thin places. There are a lot of other people who use the phrase too, who are not Christians, but I wasn't as interested in how they used it. But they would say something like this: "Heaven and earth are only about 3 feet apart; but in thin places that distance is even shorter." There are some places, some contexts, some environments, that just draw you into the presence of God. We become aware how close he really is. It becomes very clear that there is something more, something way bigger, something way more powerful. And it works differently for different people; to some extent it's in the eye of the beholder. But it's not just about some place that is extra-beautiful, or awe inspiring. It's a place that stirs in us the reality that God is right here! He's in the room! God is in this room! And that ought blow your mind; and put everything else - everything else - back into perspective. Do you think he's here ... right now?

And guys, when 2 or 3 are gathered together in his name, it's supposed to become a "thin place" for us. We become more aware of the presence of our God. We let him blow our minds, and we let his presence put everything else - everything else - back into perspective. Did you know that in this room ... we kiss God, and he kisses us back? I know, there is nothing special about this room - except this is where we Jesus followers gather every week to worship our God. It's just tap water over in that baptistery. But something magical happens in those waters. On these worship stations around this room there are these tiny little stale crackers, and these tiny little plastic cups with just a sip of grape juice. Sometimes it tastes like it's starting to go over to the dark side. But when eat that bread, and drink that cup, something magical happens. It's not just about remembering what he did for us, it's not just about tasting grace; it's about sitting down at table with our Dad, and with our Lord. He's in the room; he's at the table! This is a thin place where we do life with God.

Now listen, this is a big deal. There are two parts to worship. One part is what we give to God. The second part is what he gives to us. It's a dialogue. We get so messed up here. Most people think going to church is kind of like going to a show. Most people think you guys are the audience and as members of the audience, you're kind of hoping you're going to like the show. You're hoping you'll like the music. And you're hoping I'm not too boring. And you're hoping this thing won't go too

long. And when we're done, you'll give us your grades. The music was okay - I'll give it a 7 today. The sermon was a 10 - it's always a 10, right? We got you out pretty much on time. Give us a 9 for that - some churches go way long! The people were pretty friendly, the snacks were free. Maybe you'll give the environment an 8. It wasn't so bad, right?

About 200 years ago a Danish Jesus follower by the name of Soren Kierkegaard compared going to church with going to a play. For most people, he says, the preacher is the lead guy, I'm kind of the star of the show. Around me are all the supporting actors - Steve, the worship team. The tech people are here to give it some pop. The greeters are kind of like the ushers at some event. And you guys ... well you guys are the audience. Our job is to give you a good show, right? Kierkegaard says, "... No. That's messed up! He says, Actually, we're kind of the coaches up here. We're the prompters. We're here to help you out by holding up the cue cards. You are the actors, and He is the audience ... of one.

My preaching partner, Randy, told me about a church camp he went to once. Junior Highers, I think. They told the kids they were going to have a special guest, so they wanted to prepare some special music for their guest. So they got all the kids up on the stage, and worked on the music till it was just right. And then some guy dressed up like Jesus walked in the room and sat down. And he led the kids as they sang for Jesus, who expressed such delight. Randy says, something mystical happened, as they realized who they were really singing to.

Guys, he's here; he's in the room. And we gather here to give him the praise and the honor he deserves, and to put ourselves in a receptive place, in case he chooses to nudge us. A great worship service isn't about what we do up here; it's about what you do, in his presence. Sometimes we start thinking that it ought to be about me, what I want, what I like, what I need. Move me, awe me, feed me, please me ... right! Well, what if it's really all about him: doing life with him, for him, his way. Would that perspective change what happens in this room?

So, here's our part - here's what we do. We gather here every week to remind ourselves who we are and what we stand for. We gather here because it reminds us that we are doing life ... with God. He's here; he's

in the room; this place becomes one of those “thin places” for us. When we sing, we sing to him. When we pray, we pray to him.

- Listen: if you really believed God is in the room, would it change the way you praise him? He is “worthy” of our praise, you know. All we’ve got!
- And if you really believed God is in the room, would you be humble enough to ask his forgiveness for your sins? You’ve got them, you know. We all do! Would you ask his forgiveness?
- And would you thank him for his grace? It’s ... mind-blowing, isn’t it? If the grace of our God doesn’t take your breath away, you don’t get it!
- And if you really believed God is here, in this room, would you give yourself to him, all over again. We call that “submission.” In this room I reaffirm that Jesus is my Savior, and my Lord. I tell him that every time I go to that worship station and eat the Lord’s Supper and give my first part back to him.
- And if you really believed God is here, in this room, would you thank him, again, and again, and again, for every good thing in your life?

Well ... He’s in the room! And it’s not about me; and it’s not about you. We’re not here to please me, or to please you. We are here, in the presence of our God, to please him. It doesn’t matter whether it pleases me; and it doesn’t matter whether it pleases you. Do we please ... him?

Well, that’s just half of the dialogue. And it’s not even the coolest part...
... Now, there are some people I have a hard time talking to. Sometimes, because they do a whole lot of talking, and not a whole lot of listening. Do you ever try to talk to people like that? Or maybe, you are kind of like that - you talk way more than you listen! I have been in a lot of meetings where one or two guys, they talk more than everyone else combined. They just keep going, and going. They’ll wear you out! They kind of think that everything that crosses their minds needs saying... It doesn’t! There’s a verse some of us need to memorize. James 1.19: “You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.” Well, what if that applies to our conversations with God, too. Have you ever tried laying this over your life with God? “You must all be quick to listen - quick to listen, slow to speak - slow to speak, and slow to get angry ... with God.”

Now, most of us kind of think of worship as a monologue: we do the talking, and we hope God is listening. But what if ... What if God is not just listening, what if he's also trying to whisper ... to us. God works on us all the time, guys. He's always tweaking. You see, God loves you just the way you are; but he loves you way too much to leave you just the way you are. He's tweaking on you, nudging you towards what he means you to be.

But God tends to be very gentle, and quite shy, I think. At least for now. He let's us cooperate with him, but he also lets us resist him ... at least for now. He rarely raises his voice ... at least for now. You don't want God to raise his voice with you, right now. God doesn't force himself on us, so he lets us still him with our chatter, and with our busyness, and with our squirrels. We get so busy, we live so noisy, we are so easily distracted that we don't hear him easily. "I have things to do, places to go, people to see, games to play! I'm busy, God! How about this: I'll give you 5 ... God ... That was 4. Long enough!"

Well, on the first day of every week - of every week - we Jesus followers remember who we are and what we stand for. On the first day of every week we set aside the distractions, we turn off the noise, we close our appointment books, and we listen ... for the nudges ... and the niggles ... of God. Hard, isn't it? To silence our phones, to ignore those notifications that we have a new email, or tweet, or message, or whatever ... because none of that is as important as one of his whispers. He's in the room. We listen for his conviction of our sin, and we ask his forgiveness. We listen for his challenges to lean in. We listen for his encouragement, for his grace.

You see, worship is about putting ourselves in a receptive place where we can listen. It's not just talking at God; it's a quieting of ourselves in his presence. Whether or not he chooses to nudge or niggle - that's on him. He's God! We're not. But we want to be receptive!

You see, worship - real worship - requires a profound humility. Sometimes those who enter this room are kind of like, "I dare you to move me today!" Are you ever like that? "Go ahead, try and make me ... worship!" Or, sometimes your kind of like, "I hope they do something

today that I like!” Ever been there, done that? Guys, it’s not about me; and it’s not about you. It’s about giving him the honor and the praise he deserves, and putting ourselves in a receptive place ... because he’s here! Whether you feel him or not, he’s here! Whether you are stirred or not, he’s here! And someone here needs his touch. Don’t you dare get in the way! Don’t you dare hinder someone else receiving a nudge or a nudge from our God!

Do you know how amazing it is to sense his presence?

- The prophet Habakkuk put it like this: “The Lord is in his holy Temple. (So ... shhh!!) Let all the earth be silent before him.” (Habakkuk 2.20)
- Moses put it like this: “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (Exodus 14.14)
- King David put it like this. He says, “Be still (-- be still --) and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46.10)

That’s what worship is all about.

So, imagine ... Imagine what it would be like if a whole bunch of us transformed this church service into worship! Not religion, but worship! It would feed something deep in your soul! And being here wouldn’t feel like such a chore, a duty, a should, an ought, an obligation.

Imagine what it would feel like if - maybe not you, but maybe someone near you - imagine what it would feel like to see them touched by God. And you helped make that happen! It’s getting pretty easy for a lot of Jesus followers to blow off church. But what if what happened ... in this thin place ... was way bigger than “church.”