

Passionate Worship II

First, I want to reiterate something from last week's sermon that seemed to strike a chord with some of you. I said that worship is not theater, it is not entertainment, and you are not an audience. We are all together participating in worship, creating worship, and God is the audience. So, you want to avoid thinking like an audience, expecting to be entertained by the music or the praying or the preaching. You have to consider what you are bringing to worship: what is your attitude? What are your expectations? Do you come to feel connected to a community of believers? Do you come, expecting to connect with God? Do you come, bringing an open heart for God to transform? OR Do you come to fulfill some sort of obligation? Do you come to criticize other people in the congregation for how they look or how they behave? Which set of attitudes do you think God would find most pleasing?

Passionate Worship allows us to begin to see the world through a new interpretive lens. We look at issues and events and our relationships through God's eyes. This lens is different from the lenses many of us choose to use: "fierce individualism, acquisitive consumerism, intense nationalism, political partisanship, hopeless negativism, naïve optimism."

Placing ourselves before God regularly in Passionate Worship immerses us in God's presence so much that our worldview naturally includes the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We begin to use the language we've been taught through Bible Study, worship and prayer: "love, grace, joy, hope, forgiveness, compassion, justice, community." See how different this vocabulary is from left/right, revenge, domination, more/bigger/better stuff, love it or leave it, things will never get any better, rose-colored glasses. Through Passionate Worship, the language of God

permeates how we think, how we see things, how we choose to live. And, for this world to survive, the language of God must trump the language of the world.

If this transformation of vision is not something you have experienced or even find appealing, I suggest you give it a chance. Come to church on Sunday mornings hoping for news from God, hoping for a moment of clarity, hoping for the sense of God's presence in your heart. Come before God bringing your whole person: the good, the bad and the ugly. Don't try to impress God; don't try to hide things from God. Come to meet God in Passionate Worship, in a way you cannot meet him on your own.

Personal devotions are a very important part of the Christian life that we ignore at our peril. Otherwise, you wouldn't have received the devotional book *Cultivating Fruitfulness* to go along with our Five Practices. Your participation in Passionate Worship, as well as the other four Practices, is enhanced by your daily reading in that book. Personal devotions and corporate worship are two sides of the same coin. Both enrich the individual, but they do so in different ways. That's why it is important to have regular devotions AND attend worship.

I need to share a story from Betty's side of the family. Actually, it is about Betty's sister's husband's aunts. So, we are not in any way related to the people in this story. These two women belonged to a big UM church in Knoxville. Every Sunday morning, without fail, they would get all dressed up for church, and arrive just before the service was over, and meet people in the vestibule as if they'd been there all along. For them, the worship service was not important. What was important was seeing and being seen, meeting their friends, making sure everybody thought they were good church-going Christians, without the bother of attending worship.

They were not interested in Passionate Worship. They were interested in Passionate Deception. God may have been amused, but he certainly was not pleased.

Tonight at 7pm, and tomorrow at 10am, our discussion groups will be looking at starting my sermon at the prison. So, you may come and speak freely regarding worship, your likes and your dislikes. I'll get the notes from the discussion and study them prayerfully. But, please keep in mind that I try to do in worship what I feel God wants me to do. Your opinions are valuable and welcome, but I won't change things based solely on your opinions. I would have to see God in them. I like to think that I'm adaptable, and that nothing is set in concrete as far as worship goes.

We'll see how that goes. These discussion groups have been excellent, very valuable for the leaders. We've had at least 30 people every week. Sixty would be better, but 30 are many more than we've had at any sort of group discussion since I've been here. I thank you all for coming, and invite the rest of you to consider coming, as well.

I promise you that I will bring to worship my very best. I ask you to do the same. If your spirit soars in worship, it will be because we have made this commitment together. Come to worship determined to sing lustily, to pray mightily and to listen hungrily for a word from God. If we all bring our best, we shall all be changed, and our world will be transformed.

Walter Westbrook - October 11, 2009