

Date: April 10, 2016
 Scriptures: Acts 9:1-8; Revelation 5:6-14
 Title: Worship: God's Change Agent

Good morning!

How are you today?

It's great to see you.

You have come

from warm, cozy homes,

from a good cup of coffee

and the newspaper spread on the table;

from the blessed ease of unstructured time.

You have left all that and more behind

to come to worship.

Perhaps you have come,

because it's what you do on Sunday

or because of the great Sunday School class

and our awesome teachers;

or because of the wonderful music;

or because you are hoping, needing

to hear a good word;

or because of the community you find here.

Whatever you reason or reasons,

you have come to worship.

You know what to expect when you arrive.

Three hymns, a message, sharing the peace,

prayers, children's time, and the offering.

Hopefully, it will all be done in an hour.

The Sunday morning worship hour

seems pretty innocuous,

doesn't it?

Yet, is it?

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard says,

"Do we Christians have the foggiest idea

what sort of power we so blithely invoke?

The churches are children playing on the floor

with their chemistry sets,

mixing up a batch of TNT

to kill a Sunday morning.

It is madness to wear

ladies' straw hats and velvet 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
 wake someday and take offense,
 or the waking god may draw us out
 to where we can never return."

Maybe, Sunday morning worship
 is not as innocuous as it appears to be.
 Maybe, just maybe,
 it is the most important hour of the week.

John of Patmos,
 who may have been the Beloved Disciple John,
 certainly believed that worship
 is the most important thing we do in life.

In the book of Revelation,
 John has a vision of a journey
 he takes into heaven.

There he finds himself in the throne room of God
 where he sees God sitting on the throne surrounded
 by twenty four elders
 and four heavenly creatures each with six wings
 and full of eyes inside and all around.

All are worshipping God and singing,
 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive
 glory and honor and power,
 for you did create all things,
 and because of you,
 they existed and were created."

There in the throne room John realizes
 that worship is the crucial,
 the decisive,
 the all important activity in heaven.

As John gets his bearings,
 he sees that God is holding a scroll
 sealed with seven seals
 in his right hand.

The scroll contains God's decrees for the future.

As he looks, he hears a strong angel ask,

“Who is worthy to open the scroll
and break its seals?”

No one says a word.

In that moment,

realizing no one could open the scroll
or look into it,

John begins to weep inconsolably.

He weeps, because he understands

that without a future there is no hope
for the creatures above the earth,
or on the earth,
or under the earth.

Hearing John’s anguish,

one of the twenty-four elders tells him
the Lion from the tribe of Judah,
the Root of David,
has overcome

and is able to open
the scroll and its seven seals.

At that very same moment,

John sees

not a Lion

but a Lamb as if slaughtered

standing between God and the elders.

This one, the Lamb, takes the scroll from God’s hand,

breaks the seals and opens it.

It is he, the Lamb, who has won the victory,

he, who holds the **future** in his hands.

Seeing him,

all the heavenly hosts worship him,

falling before him

and singing in joyful acclamation.

John paints a powerful, mind boggling, heart stopping
scene of worship in heaven.

He does this.

because he wants us to understand

that worship is the crucial activity in heaven.

This worship centers around

the Lamb, God and the cross.

The Lamb,

is able to open the scroll and break the seals,
because he willingly went to the cross.

What Jesus did on the cross,

shook creation to the core,
turned the world upside down.

The cross of Jesus proclaims

for all the world to see
that it is not the world's might,
not the world's street smart,
not the world's biggest and best,
not the world's wealthiest or brightest
that **will** lead us into the future.

None of these things

can ultimately lead creation forward.

Rather, it is self-giving love,

the love Jesus poured out on the cross
that will lead us into
a life-giving, eternally right-side up future.

Just as worship is the crucial activity in heaven,

so it is the crucial activity here on earth.

Yet, worship is risky business.

In fact, it may be the most subversive thing we do.

It is risky,

because here in worship,
we put ourselves in the place
where God can change us,
blind us with the light of divine truth
that we may see with new eyes.

With new eyes,

see the perversity of unjust governments
and self-aggrandizing institutions and people.

With new eyes,

see our complicity in the continuation of the status quo
through our silence and our indifference.

With new eyes,

see the world's walking wounded for who they are,
our brothers and sisters
with whom we will be forever united in death.

In worship we put ourselves in the place
 where God can speak to our hearts,
 speak to us
 through the beauty and truth of the word
 and heartfelt music
 and the community's loving embrace.

God and the Lamb and the cross
 can change the way we think about things,
 the way we feel about things,
 the way we do things.

That's way Annie Dillard says Ben and Diego
 should hand out safety helmets and life vests.

Worship changes us.

"It turns our values, habits, and ideas upside down
 as it forms our character
 and turns us right side up eternally."

(Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*).

A few days ago, I stopped by the Whataburger
 on the drag
 to grab a salad before going to the class
 I am taking at the seminary.

Wanting to review my notes,
 I chose a seat in a corner near the door
 and placed the plastic number on the table.

Not long after sitting down,
 a homeless man,
 bearing the marks of years on the street,
 walked in.

He stood on the other side of a half wall
 that made the corner where I was sitting.
 He was fully engaged in a conversation with himself.

After standing there for several minutes,
 he walked over close to the counter.

Leaning against a wall,
 he continued the conversation with himself.

His demeanor was placid,
 and he clearly posed no threat to anyone.

Then, suddenly, he stopped talking,
 moved to the counter

and asked the young man there
if he could have a cup for water.

Very respectfully,
the young man reached for a cup
and gave it to him.

The man took the cup,
got some water,
and sat down one table over from me.

As he did, I thought to myself,
“Oh, no!
God, no!
Don’t let him want to talk with me.
I need to study.”

As I waited for my salad,
a still small voice began telling me
to buy the homeless man a hamburger.

I resisted,
telling the voice
I needed to study
and the man would surely want to talk
if I bought him a hamburger.

The still small voice got louder.
My resistance grew more intense.
Then, suddenly, I saw the irony of the situation.
I had come to get lunch and to study
and like the homeless man was now involved
in an intense conversation
with a very insistent still, small voice.

When the young man brought me my salad,
I asked him if I could order
and pay for a hamburger for the homeless man.

He smiled and said yes.
I leaned over
and quietly asked the homeless man
if he would like a hamburger.

Hearing me,
he stopped what he was doing and said,
“Yes, please, a number 5.
Thank you, mam.”

He then moved to the table between us.
 I said to the still, quiet voice,
 "I told you so.
 He's going to want to talk."
 And he did, only not with me.

He sat at his table; I at mine.
 He talked; I studied.
 Near the end of the meal,
 I felt uncomfortable.
 Looking up, I saw a man
 several tables over staring at me.
 Two other men were sitting with him.
 I looked at him questioningly,
 as if to say,
 "What's up?"
 He responded with a thumbs-up
 and the biggest kool-aid smile
 I have ever seen.
 Then,
 as I prepared to leave,
 everyone working in the kitchen,
 five or six men and women,
 came and stood at the door to the kitchen,
 smiled their kool-aid smiles
 and called to me,
 "Thank you!
 Thank you!
 Please come again."

I tell you this story
 not to brag about what I did.
 Remember, I strongly resisted
 buying the homeless man lunch.
 Rather, I tell you this story
 because people are hungry for more than a Whataburger.
 They are hungry to see and hear
 that the world does not have the final say.
 Hungry to believe that self-giving love,
 not hate
 or indifference

or despair
or any other death-dealing power
stands at the center of creation.

The filling of the people's hunger and the world's need
begins in worship,
for it is in worship
that we open ourselves to radical change
through God's radical love.

In worship, we hear a story to tell the nations
and what story it is!

So, grab you crash helmets and life preservers.

Worship is risky and subversive
and absolutely the most glorious adventure of life.

Amen.