

## “Is Your Worship Growing?”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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### Psalm 19

- <sup>1</sup>The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
<sup>2</sup>Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.  
<sup>3</sup>There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;  
<sup>4</sup>yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.  
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
<sup>5</sup>which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,  
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.  
<sup>6</sup>Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hid from its heat.  
<sup>7</sup>The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;  
<sup>8</sup>the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;  
<sup>9</sup>the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.  
<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.  
<sup>12</sup>But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.  
<sup>13</sup>Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.  
<sup>14</sup>Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

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**F**or the past six weeks we have been talking about worship. We have looked at 10 convictions about worship and we have talked about the way we shape worship and worship shapes us. This morning I want to wrap up this series by asking you a question: Is your worship growing?

Now that may sound like a strange question, but since worship is a spiritual

act, and I believe all spiritual things grow, I believe worship has the capacity to grow. I believe as I grow as a Christian my understanding of worship, my practice of worship, my experience of worship should be growing too. I believe yours' should be too!

Now, this morning's Psalm is from the lectionary, it is the prescribed Psalm for the day. It doesn't specifically speak about worship, but as we know,

the Psalms were and are the hymnbook for Jewish worship. Every Psalm is in some way about worship. So this morning I want to reflect a little on the text and a little on how our worship should be growing as Christians.

This Psalm seems to shift its focus as it progresses. The first few verses are about creation and God's activity in it. Then in the middle it turns from this upward look to a downward look, to speak about the word of God – about Scripture. Then the writer turns inward to reflect on his own soul. He ends with a prayer – almost a benediction – a “going-out” petition for the writer's life in the world. The segues are not smooth, they are abrupt, but they each lift up something about the spiritual life that relates to worship.

The writer begins by talking about a deep mystery in creation. He says the “heavens are telling... the firmament proclaims... pours forth speech... declares knowledge,” yet “there is no speech, nor are there words, their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” It is a remarkable way to talk about how God's presence, God's glory is communicated in the wonders of the universe. There is no doubt that our worship is expanded when we enlarge our understanding of God. I like the writer who reminds us that some of the most profound theological reflections of humankind were put to paper by Bedouin herdsmen who did not have technology or science or the benefits of degrees from institutions of higher education. They simply sat under

the stars beside their herds night after night, year after year. These are the thoughts the Psalm writer proclaims.

James Earl Massey tells a story about Willard L. Sperry, long-time dean of the Harvard Divinity School. Sperry's understanding of God expanded during his early ministry. He was serving as associate to an older pastor. One Sunday the pastor preached a sermon about recent developments in astronomy. The next day, Sperry asked the senior pastor what use could such an exalted subject be to people “whose daily activities and concerns seemed so remote to it.” Massey says, “Exercising the privilege of age, and the benefit of wisdom, the pastor answered that while the subject might seem of little or no use at all, it could greatly enlarge one's idea of God.” Sperry thought about this and realized, “for the first time, how much an enlarged idea of God provides the right framework for the rest of one's religious understandings.” So the first way one can grow in worship is to grow in one's understanding of God.<sup>1</sup>

Then as we have noted, the Psalmist turns from this upward looking moment of awe to look at the Scriptures he held in his own hands, so to speak. He writes a poem of praise about the blessings of God's word. Sometimes we who do not take the Bible literally forget to take the Bible at all. But this Psalm reminds us of the great truth and benefit there is in spending time in God's word.

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<sup>1</sup> James Earl Massey, “God and the Self,” 30GoodMinutes.org, Feb. 6, 1994.

He practically raves about the value of God's word:

- it revives the soul
- makes wise the simple,
- rejoices the heart
- enlightens the eyes
- more desirable than gold
- sweeter than Tupelo honey [ ok, I added the "Tupelo" part but fans of Van Morrison will understand. ]
- gives warning
- in them is great reward.

I want to suggest a couple of ways this works that came to my attention through our online daily devotionals that come from the UCC.

The first is the reminder that familiarity with Scripture, and the Psalms in particular, is rewarding because it allows us to see that God is not a paper-thin god. The Scriptures and the Psalms in particular are very aware of the difficulties of real life. The Psalmist in many other Psalms engages God in a verbal sparring over the difficulties and vicissitudes of life.

Back when I was at Harvard I served at a church with Maren Tirabassi who writes about this honesty of Scriptures and this relevancy of God. She talks about a Jacksonville son, James Weldon Johnson, who in his poem "A Prodigal Son," uses the phrase "Your arm's too short to box with God." She says the fact is Scripture tells us our arms aren't too short to box with God.

She looks at the story of the Syrophenician woman who asks Jesus

to heal her daughter. At first he refuses, even seeming to insult her by suggesting she is little better than a dog. But she comes back with a quick reply that "boxes" Jesus' ears a bit. She says, "yes, but even the dogs get the scraps from the owner's dinner table." And Jesus replies that she can go, confident that her faith has made her daughter well.

Maren Tirabassi says, "what is most powerful is that Jesus invites a desperate mother to argue with him, to challenge him, to fight with him. He applauds her doing so." She goes on to say, "We can be angry with God; we can yell prayers at the Almighty about the hardest and most hurting events in our lives—the house foreclosed or job lost, the addicted child, broken marriage or intolerant family, the bleak diagnosis or terrible grief. All our stress, all our fury, all the injustice of society, all the pettiness or pathos of personal situations is absorbed in God's love. Because Jesus honors our complaints and enfolds us with a wideness of embrace, we can embrace God." I would suggest to you that worship grows when we know we can be honest with God about our laments as well as our praises.

That leads me to the second insight that one of the devotional writers shared this week. William Green wrote about how prayer really works, and I think this is a powerful insight. He says, the Scriptures tell us, "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." He points out that "Jesus did not say believe that you

will receive what you pray for. He said, ‘believe that you *have* received it.’”

He goes on to say, “So often we pray for what we already have. Time and again the psalmist says ‘God is my strength,’ not ‘God grant me strength.’ The same [ is true ] with all kinds of help and healing, forgiveness and guidance, an ability to keep the faith and to pray. ‘God is my rock and redeemer.’ Not please, God, give me something I need and don’t have.

So he asks rhetorically, “So why pray? Because our petitions rightly understood are not requests but *praise*. The dreariest psalms, full of neediness and despair, almost always move seamlessly into declarations of what God has done and makes possible. We are created in the likeness of God’s goodness and strength—‘little less than God.’ True, we fall away from this and abuse our God-given endowments. But we are not stripped of them. And prayer recalls us to who we are in the first place.” He calls it an awakening or a re-awakening to what is ours. I would call it a way to grow in worship. If worship is first and foremost about praise then once we have sounded our complaints to God, we can pray to God in praise for how God addresses our everyday needs and day-in-day-out hurts, fears, and hopes.

William Green adds this, saying, “Often enough I’ve felt like some bottomless pit that no amount of encouragement or reassurance could fill. At those times [ in the past ] I’d always pray for strength I lacked. I’ve now taken to praying another way. ‘God,

make me aware of the strength you’ve given me.’ That’s proven a good way to respect God, and others. When I quit looking elsewhere for what I already have, I find it!” So prayer, worship, the spiritual life in general isn’t just about getting filled when we are empty, but giving praise for what we have that we do not recognize fills us.

The Psalmist ends with a prayer for forgiveness for hidden errors and faults and then asks God to send him out into the world with inner meditations and outer words that are acceptable to God. In short he prays that his worship does not end in the hour or so he gathers with God’s people, but that it continues “outside” in the world. I know when I was growing up I would often hear the preacher pray that before the sermon. But I think it is more fitting here, at the end, as a way to send us out into the world.

I pray we will all continue to grow in worship. I believe that is the key to spiritual growth in every area of life. This Psalm offers us insight into growing spiritually. It reminds us to look up and be filled with awe and praise for God’s glory. It reminds us that if we look and listen to God’s word we will be filled with blessing and gratitude. And it prays, as we too should pray, that we would go out into the world to continue our worship and that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord, who is our rock and our redeemer. AMEN.