

Psalm 122
Why do we Worship?
Discipleship Series

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Why did you choose to come to church this morning – on a long weekend when you could be doing many other activities: sleeping in, camping, fishing, hunting, watching a movie, completing house projects, reading a book. Did you come to see your friend? Did you come to listen to the piano being played? Did you come to participate in the sacrament of communion? Did you come to sing or pray? Did you come because someone asked you to?

Here's what's interesting about the Christian life in Canada. Much of expected Christian behaviour is socially enforced through our laws: don't murder, don't steal, don't lie or falsify information. But going to church is one act that is not socially enforced, except maybe for kids whose parents require them to come. There is no law that states you must go to church. In fact, in my lifetime I have observed a shift away from society encouraging attending worship services. I remember when places of employment, retail centres, sports activities and businesses were closed on Sunday. But now, society actually expects that Sunday mornings are open and free to shop, play competitive sports, conduct business, complete the house reno project. Worship of God with the gathered community of disciples is not only not socially enforced, it is no longer even a social expectation, evident by the number of programs and activities on Sunday mornings.

So if no one expects you to come – if your colleagues and peers and neighbours suggest you do something else with your Sunday morning, why did you come here today? Why do you come here, week after week, month after month, year after year? Well, Psalm 122 is the song that's sung by the person who chooses to go to church to worship God. This song was sung thousands of years ago. But it is also sung every Sunday by people of Christian faith around the world who gather together to worship the one true God. After all, we can never find a faithful Christian

without also finding acts of worship. We cannot find a Christian community without also finding a church that worships.

Why is worship so vital to the life of a disciple? This Psalm gives us a clue. A background reminder: Psalms 120-134 were sung by the pilgrims, by the people of God as they journeyed to and from Jerusalem for the annual festivals. These are the songs that reminded the people who they were – people of God - and where they were going – they were going to God. The songs sustained them through the perils and danger of the journey. The songs encouraged the anxious and fearful about leaving home. The songs gave meaning for those who saw the pilgrimage as an inconvenience, an interruption from daily life. The songs affirmed the joy for those who looked forward to the journey. Of all the 15 songs of ascent, Psalm 122 is the one that tells us what happens to God's people when we worship.

You see God is a good God. He is perfect, he is loving, he is righteous, he is holy, he is faithful. And in his great wisdom and care for us, he has given us many gifts so that we may experience the fullness of life. He gave us the gift of a structure or framework for our lives. That structure revolves around worship. When God first formed his people, God commanded them to go to Jerusalem to worship. Jerusalem was the focal point for the people of God, it was where heaven met earth, it was the place of God's presence. For centuries and generations, worship is that act of the disciple which gives structure to our lives. Psalm 122 shows us why and how.

First, worshipping God is about being united and joined together. In verse 3, the Psalmist describes Jerusalem as a city that is closely compacted together. The Hebrew word for compact

means unite, join, or join together. As we read on, we read that Jerusalem is not only built closely compacted but is also the place where the tribes – the people of God - go. So the Psalmist is using this sense of unity and joining together in two contexts. There is the sense that the city of Jerusalem itself is built beautifully, architecturally impressive, and purposeful in that the different parts of the city fit together. Have you ever traveled to a city only to be completely confused with its layout? Or maybe you've traveled to a new city and found it to actually make sense. My younger sister works as a city planner in BC. When she visited Whitehorse last summer, one of her first requests was to walk through downtown to see how the city was laid out, was built. She was looking to see if the city fit together, if it made sense, if all the pieces that make a city were joined together. So Jerusalem is a city that's built to fit together. There is a second way we see unity and being joined together. There is also the sense that the tribes, the people of God are joined together and united through worship.

There are two implications for this understanding of compact/unite/join together. One – it has to do with the community of believers. Through worship, we are joined together and united with each other. The many tribes of Israel went to Jerusalem to worship. There was only one temple in Jerusalem so the tribes could not choose which place of worship to go to. The tribes did not say “I don't like that person or that structure is aesthetically distracting or the trumpet is too loud or their dress too improper”. All the tribes gathered in the same place, at the same temple to worship the same Living God. The people of God were united and joined together because they came to worship. Coming to worship united them as much as the act of worshipping united them.

Two – there is a kind of unity or joining together that happens inside of us when we worship. The pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem carrying the many pieces of their life: the celebration of the birth of a new child or the devastation from a child’s sickness; the joy of a plentiful harvest or the worry of gathering enough to eat for a growing family; the gratitude for a warm home or the angst in finding the material to build a new room; the joy of friendships or the grief of losing a friend. A pilgrim would carry those scattered pieces of life – marriage relationship, parent-child relationships, home and garden provision, economy and health – to Jerusalem. And there, in worship to God, those scattered pieces become a unified whole, they are compacted, they are joined together into a coherent and cohesive unit. It is worship of the Triune God which brings unity where there is fragmentation, brings meaning where there is confusion, brings a joining together where there is separation. This is because in worship, we go back to the basics of faith: we remember once again that God creates, God loves, God redeems, God provides, God forgives, God blesses, God heals, God is with us because he is in a covenant relationship with us.

Consider, for example, the hymn that was sung during the offering: *Be Still, my Soul*. We sang *Be still, my soul. The Lord is on your side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain. Leave to your God to order and provide; in every change he faithful will remain. Be still, my soul. Your God will undertake to guide the future as He has the past; your hope, your confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be right at last. The waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below*. When we worship, the fragmented pieces of our lives become clearer as they are joined together and we are reminded again of God’s love, provision, care. We entrust those broken pieces to the Creator, the sustainer, the healer, the restorer.

It is true that worship may not instantly or immediately bring cohesion and unity. Those expectations come from an instant gratification view of discipleship. But we know that discipleship is long and slow work that requires faithfulness and perseverance and patience. So we come, week after week, month after month, hoping, believing, trusting that God will bring unity and join together those parts that are all turned around and backwards.

So worship is the disciple's act that gives contour, structure, framework for life. This happens because of the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, listening and responding to the Word of God, participating in the Eucharist, celebrating and responding to church family announcements, giving our resources of time, money, and skill to the church. In all these actions of worship we tell each other that great story of God and, by doing so, we rightly position ourselves on our knees before our God. We tell each other God's story and God's promises. We remind each other of his provision of strength and faith in times of challenge, of his gifts of love and joy and peace, of his character of holiness and righteousness and justice. The first thing worship does for us is give us a structure for our lives by joining us together with other believers and making the scattered pieces of our life a unified whole.

Secondly, worship is that act which cultivates, nurtures and sustains our relationship with God. After describing the unity and joining together that happens when we worship, the Psalmist says in verses 4 and 5 that Jerusalem "*is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.*" When we worship, we praise God's name. Now the Hebrew word that we translate 'praise' comes from the root word to throw or cast. It means to confess, to

give praise, to give thanks. Worship is about giving thanks to God and praising Him. Why do we praise him? Well, since worship reminds us of all that God has done and is doing the natural response is one of thanksgiving and praise for that. But we don't just praise his name because that's a natural response. We give him thanks and praise because we are commanded to do so. The Psalmist says we praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. The Hebrew word for statute is better translated as testimony or witness. God commanded us to praise him as a testimony to who he is. When we worship, we obey God's commands to testify to the world about our God. Our coming here this morning is a testimony to the world of God's love for us. And there is much that we praise God for and testify about – when we sin, God forgives us and we thank him for that. When we're living in faith and God is helping us, we give him thanks. When we're going through hardship and struggle and God provides faith and strength for each day, we thank him for that.

We started our worship service this morning by singing *Come, Thou Almighty King*. This was a song of praise that says *Come, Thou Almighty King, help us thy name to sing, help us to praise: Father all glorious, over all victorious, come and reign over us, ancient of days.*

But every so often there comes a day or a season of life where we just don't feel like praising God. Where we don't feel like giving him thanks or testifying to his character and his goodness. Maybe our employment situation is falling apart, or a relationship is breaking down, or a loved one's health is deteriorating, or we are emotionally weary and exhausted and the last thing we want to do is come to church to praise God. We don't want to come because we're a mess – there's too many fragmented pieces and no unified whole - and we conclude that we are a

hypocrite to come and worship God because we're more overwhelmed than hopeful, more angry than peaceful, more grief-stricken than joyful. Here's the interesting thing: God still commands us to praise him. The Psalmist says we praise God because we are commanded to do so.

You see, in God's great wisdom and care for us, he knows what we need. God knows that what we feel is not always reliable when it comes to matters of faith. We may feel that God has abandoned us but that is not true. We may feel that God has stopped loving us and caring for us but that is not true. We may feel that God isn't actually in control but that is not true. But because of what we feel, we conclude that we don't want to worship because we don't feel like it. If feelings controlled our lives, many of us would not worship at all. Important and needed emphasis on our emotions and feelings has rightly helped us to value our feelings and to value mental health and well-being. But here's a caution, a danger that we start to believe that if we don't feel something, then the act is not genuine or sincere or authentic. If we don't feel joy when we praise God, we conclude it's not authentic praise. But God's Word says something different. The wisdom of God and His Word says that our actions can change our feelings faster than our feelings can change our actions. So in the act of worship, we develop feelings for God. Worship is not first about feeling something for God then acting. Worship is acting on what God has commanded and through those actions our feelings change. So we worship God even when we don't feel like it because worshipping God will change how we feel.

When we praise God and obey his command to give him thanks, our attention shifts. Our attention is no longer absorbed by self, by our concerns and issues, our needs and requests, our joys and sorrows. Our attention instead shifts and becomes centered on God. It is focused on the

decisions of God. The Psalmist writes in verse 5 “*There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.*” Judgment refers to justice, to a setting right of all wrongs. Judgment in this context is not so much about declaring something good or bad or right or wrong. It isn’t about describing or explaining something. Judgement – justice – is about doing something. It is about restoring that which is broken and powerless, it is about making things right, it is about doing. Worship focuses our attention on what God does in this world – focuses our attention on the ways God restores, God puts things in their right order and right place (which is what righteousness is all about). We hear God’s judgment and justice in God’s Word. All throughout our worship, we hear God’s Word: from the first word – the call to worship - to the last word – the benediction. We hear God’s Word in our songs. Our prayers are responses to God’s Word. And although during a worship service, we are listening to the music composers, to the prayers, to the service leader, to the preacher, we are first and foremost listening to God. Our attention is turned to what God says to us – to his pronouncement of justice and judgment.

We sang *It is Well with my Soul*. This is the song that’s sung by those who simply don’t feel like worshipping God but do so because it’s commanded, because it moves our attention away from ourselves and rightly on to God. This is the song that’s sung to remind us of how God is making things right, acting justly, and restoring what’s broken. Listen again to the lyrics *When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot thou hast taught me to say ‘it is well, it is well with my soul.’ Though Satan should buffet, tho trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed his own blood for my soul.*

Thirdly and lastly, worship does something to us for the rest of the week, from Monday through Saturday, those everyday days where we're living and sleeping, working and playing, socializing and being alone, eating and cooking, cleaning and making messes.

Look at the first word of verse 6. Our Bibles translate it as 'pray' but it is better translated as 'ask'. The Hebrew word is informal, casual, the kind of word that's used in our everyday to ask for another piece of pie, to ask for directions, to ask to borrow a hammer. It isn't the Hebrew word that's used to describe prayer. In verse 6, we hear the Psalmist transitioning away from the place of worship to the everyday life of discipleship. And what is it that the Psalmist asks for?

The Psalmist repeatedly uses two words: peace and prosperity. Now prosperity does not mean wealth or money or investments or stocks or having more. Prosperity means ease, quietness, leisure. It expresses a posture of relaxation, of being at ease knowing that everything is all right because God is with us, over us, and for us. The Psalmist asks for peace and prosperity for oneself.

But this prayer, this ask, this Monday to Saturday living isn't only a pursuit of peace and prosperity for self. Look at verses 8 and 9. It says *For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you". For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity.* The prayer of the disciple is that other disciples and worshippers would be blessed by peace and prosperity. We ask for peace and prosperity not for our own benefit or advantage, but for the benefit of God's House, for the benefit of the church. Both my being at peace, at ease,

and prospering and you being at peace, at ease and prospering is for the sake of the church. And so we seek each other's good because of worship. This is the promise we make to each other.

So it is for all those reasons that the Psalmist can enthusiastically and sincerely declare in verse 1 *"I rejoiced with those who said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord."* We rejoice that we can worship God because worshipping God gives structure to our life by joining us together with others and brings cohesiveness and wholeness to our scattered life. We rejoice that God has commanded us to worship because it responds to our need to be in relationship with God. We rejoice that we can worship God because it moves our attention of our selves and on to God's Word of justice and judgment. We rejoice that we can worship God because it invites us deeper into God's abiding gifts of peace and prosperity.