

Why Are We Here? Passionate Worship!

January 8, 2023

Pastor John Mars

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage taken from the book of Luke, chapter 18, verses 9 through 14.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself; ‘Lord, I thank You that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, and adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

May God bless the reading of His Word.

Today we are continuing our series about why we are here: why we are here as individuals and why we are here as a church. We are here to worship God passionately, not like we are half asleep, but passionately. I have had the privilege in my lifetime to be a part of many, many, many different worship services in many different settings of many different kinds. I have been in worship services in the wilderness in Alaska, and I have been in worship services in grand cathedrals. I have experienced all types of things in worship, and I've seen a lot of things happen. Some of them are awesome and wonderful and glorious. Some of them are just downright funny. I was doing a worship service in the Arctic of Alaska, where the Black River runs into the Porcupine River, shortly before it runs into the Yukon River, inside of the Arctic. And I was leading a group of preteens in a wilderness camp. I was conducting a worship service when we were interrupted by a black bear and two cubs! I have other animals that have visited my services. One afternoon I opened my eyes after a prayer only to find a four-foot snake coming right down the aisle. Holly, one of my pianists hit the first chords on her piano, and a rat ran up her leg! I had a church where there was a certain time of year that we had bats in the sanctuary every Sunday. And if the organist, Debbie, played too loud, the bats would get up and fly around. One morning I was preaching, and a black widow spider fell out from under my lapel.

I've had all kinds of things happen during worship services, like the time I was doing a baptism for a little guy who hadn't quite yet reached puberty. He stepped off the bottom step of the baptistry and went completely under water. I had to fish him out. And then there are children in worship. One of the things they teach you in seminary is: Don't ever ask kids a question if you don't want an answer. I said one Sunday, “Kids, I'm going to tell you about a four-letter word.” And this little girl said, “Is it ****?” And I almost lost the service! I did lose a service to a child once. I was doing the worship, and I got to a dramatic pause in my sermon, and I heard what sounded like water running in the sanctuary. And one of the little girls jumped up in the back and said, “Mommy, Mommy, I went potty!” I have seen all kinds of things happen in worship.

Worship occurs when God's people gather in expectancy, called "kolyape," expecting to hear from God. My first song leader (in the South we call our worship leaders our song leaders, because they begin by directing the choir and getting them started, and then they turn to the people in the audience and begin to lead them and get them all fired up to sing) my first song leader was a guy named Troy, one of my best friends. He used to crack me up because he'd be leading the music, directing with his hands like this, and somebody would come in and he'd wave at him and just go right back into leading the music. Everybody would turn around to see who walked in. But one of the things that he used to say on a regular basis is: "What did you come here expecting to get? What did you come here expecting?" You see, passionate worship occurs when those who are leading worship expect God to talk through them. Passionate worship occurs when people who are worshiping expect God to do what we say in the South: Show up and show out. Jesus expected God to do things when he worshipped. And Jesus got in trouble, often in worship, because he expected things to happen that "don't happen in church." He expected people to be forgiven of their sins. He expected people to get healed, and he expected to convict people of their sins. In fact, Aaron, one time when he was preaching, when he got through, the congregation tried to kill him. That's not how you want a sermon to end! But Jesus expected God to work. Fruitful, vital, growing Christians and churches practice passionate worship. They gather in expectancy. What do you expect? Are you here to participate or evaluate? If you're here to participate, if you come expecting, you will probably get what you are expecting. And if you came to evaluate, we're gonna mess up. Trust me, I'll make sure of that! If you came to evaluate, (since the choir did such a wonderful job this morning, I'm gonna say this) if you expected the choir to drag, they will. (The choir didn't!) If you expected Aaron to mess up on the announcements, he will. (He didn't!) If you expect the pastor to be mildly entertaining and completely predictable, as usual, I will. What did you come expecting?

Passionate worship draws us together and draws us nearer to God. When we worship together, it changes things. Did we not learn that during COVID? It was awesome to know that our brothers and sisters in Christ were watching the same service we were. It's awesome right now to know that there are literally hundreds of people watching this service, literally all over the world. That's awesome. But it is different being together. We feed on one another. We draw one another closer to one another and closer to God. And passionate worship must be a priority. It must be a priority for the individual; it must be a priority for the congregation. Too often, in our modern lives, we schedule our lives and then try to fit God in. God comes first. Worship first, and schedule the other stuff around it.

In our passage of Scripture, it's not really about worship; it's more about attitude. But certainly prayer is a part of worship. And the Pharisee and the tax collector are at the temple. And Jesus says, "The Pharisee gets up and he prays about himself." Now, his posture is maybe a little foreign to us, but it was the posture of prayer among Jewish people at the time of Christ: standing, looking to heaven and raising their hands, eyes open, praying to God. But his prayer wasn't to God; it was about himself. He said, "God, I am so grateful that I am so much better than everybody else. I am not a sinner. I am not an adulterer. I am not like that tax collector. And Lord, You know I tithe everything I get, even the mint from my garden. And Lord, You know that I fast twice a week." Now,

as we read that with our modern eyes, we go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on! He fasted twice a week?" Because when we think of fasting, we think of going without anything to eat or drink for a 24-hour period, right? And how could you do that twice a week? Well, the fasting he was referring to is that you fast during the daylight hours. You can eat before daylight, and you can eat after dark. And he fasted twice a week. Guess what? It's not called for. There's only one fast that was mandatory in the Jewish law and that was on the Day of Atonement. What he is saying to God is, "God, I am going above and beyond." What he was saying is, "God I am so good, You owe me!"

The tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even go in. And he beat on his breast, and he said, "God, I know who I am. Have mercy on me, a sinner." And God said, "I'll take that one. I'll take that one." And he was accepted, and he was changed. And he was acceptable in God's eyes, though he knew that he knew that he knew he was a sinner, because he humbled himself before the Lord. Passionate worship takes place when we've come before God, not with fear and trembling, but with reverence and with expectancy. We expect to hear from God and, as a result, we experience justification. We experience restoration. We experience a change of heart. We experience transformation. We are here to praise God and to receive from God what God wants us to have. Sometimes what we need is we need to know that we are home, that this is home, these are my people, this is my place. This is where I feel at home and loved. Sometimes we need to be assured that we have been forgiven, that we are in a right relationship with God. And sometimes we need a boot in our hind parts. Passionate worship happens when we come expectantly.

Have you ever gone away from a worship service and thought, "That was just for me!" Have you ever gone away and said, "Wow, that was just...Pastor, do you have a microphone in my home?" I've had people ask me that. And the answer is, "No, but I know Somebody who does." Have you ever gone away from a worship service and said, "Wow! That was just for me!" You see, here's what I have learned that takes place in passionate worship. While the choir is singing, and while the scriptures are being read, and while we are praying together, and while the Word is being delivered, we aren't the only ones talking. The Holy Spirit is talking. The Holy Spirit is communicating. And I have to be honest, as a young minister I used to get mad while I was preaching, because I would see some of my people check out, and you can tell. You can tell. Trust me, I could tell. But here's what I have found out--sometimes that's because something that has been sung or read or said has triggered something. And the Holy Spirit is taking somebody on their own little trip and communicating to them what they need at that moment. Now, when you start snoring...! But it happens once or twice a month, right here at Central, that I have people say, after the service or the next day, "Pastor, I sure appreciate what you said about so and so and thus and such." And I didn't say anything about so and so and thus and such. And here is what has happened: You see, when I'm speaking, and when there is singing, and when there is music playing, the Holy Spirit is also talking.

So, I want to ask you: What did you come here expecting today? Did you come here expecting to evaluate the performance, or for the Spirit of God to form you, to change you, to transform you? If you came expecting God to show up and show out, He already has. And if you came expecting nothing, you're probably gonna get it. We show up to praise God, expecting God to touch us with His love and with His Spirit. What did you come here expecting today? Passionate worship occurs when we expect God to touch us with His Spirit. So, I want to challenge you as an individual, and I want to challenge

you as a congregation: Let us dedicate ourselves to passionate worship, as individuals and as a congregation. Because if we are enthused about what God is doing in our life, and we are enthused about what God is doing with us collectively, it's contagious and we draw one another in. So let us resolve, as we begin this new year, to worship God passionately. Let's pray.

Thank you, God, for talking to us this morning through what has been said, and what has been played, and what has been sung. We're grateful, God, that the Spirit is always at work everywhere and all the time. We are grateful that You have spoken with us here today, in our hearts and in our minds. And Lord, we pray and we dedicate ourselves, as individuals and as a church, to show up every Sunday expecting You to work among us. And Lord, also, as we gather expectantly, let us be open to how You work in many and various ways. In Jesus' name, amen.