

St. Luke's UMC
January 10, 2021

Becoming: Who We Are Meant to Be
Who We Are Meant to Be: God-Centered!
Psalm 137: 1,4; Ezekiel 1 (selected verses)

This week made me realize that one of the things that tires me is not just the past year, but the past several years. It's the frequency of unnecessary chaos in our country that makes me feel as a pastor that no matter what I had planned to preach on Sunday, I need to scrap it in order to address the issue of the week. This week, we had another one as rioters, insurrectionists, invaded the US Capitol Building. More chaos. More division. More signs of racism and hatred. How did we get here?

Its probably because we allow so many things to determine our source of truth. There has to be a link between our divisions today and the fact that we are the most informed society ever. It's just that our sources of information are infinite and so very different. Many years ago the Church was the source of people's information. Often, priests were the most educated in a community. The church was where news briefings were given. And, of course, there were problems with that. The Church perpetuated the idea that the earth is flat. It was the Church that considered it a heresy to think the earth revolves around the sun. It was the Church that made the teaching of evolution a crime.

But I like to think of these as the human side of church. The influence of flawed people who don't fully understand the truth. This problem exists everywhere. You don't have to go to church to hear people perpetuating falsehoods. But there's something we shouldn't lose about looking to God for our source of truth.

And that's why I don't need to scrap the sermon for today, because in this series we are thinking about what we can count on this year in St. Luke's when there's so much uncertainty. Today, the topic we planned is worship. That one of things we can count on this year is that we will worship—and when we worship we expose ourselves to our ultimate source of Truth.

So let me take us back to another chaotic and unpredictable time in history. It was the early 6th century BC in Babylon, which was located near the modern city of Baghdad, Iraq. Jews from Jerusalem who had been captured by the armies of the despot Nebuchadnezzar and taken back to Babylon. One day a community of these exiles gathered along the banks of the Kebar River and reminisced about the temple in Jerusalem. They recalled how they would walk up the road of ascent looking at the magnificent edifice of the temple with its bleached white stone walls and gold gilded roof. And they recalled how they would sing as they went and the joy they felt. But now, they are removed from all that. And they said in despair, **“By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”** What were they asking? How can we worship here? God isn't in this place. We're all alone.

Let's pause there for a moment. Have you spent any time along the Kebar River? Do you feel like that's where you are today as we enter month 11 of this pandemic? You try to stay engaged. You watch the services online, but you remember what Sundays used to feel like, and it's just hard to sing along with the hymns. It's hard to stay as engaged and feel God's presence. And you wonder, how can I sing the Lord's song in this place?

Well, a prophet named Ezekiel came to the exiles one day. The name Ezekiel means "God is strong." Ezekiel comes with a word from the Lord, but he doesn't speak it. He offers this word in the form of visions, visions that begin with an image of wheels in the sky. The wheels belong to heavenly messengers, but the wheels are unusual. They are always turning. God is on the move. And the wheels can move in all four directions at the same time. God is everywhere. God is not limited by space or distance.

And for a few moments the people get caught up in this vision together. For a few moments they lose awareness of their surrounding and they become captivated, because they understand it. They feel it. They now know that God is coming to them. They are not alone. And without perhaps realizing it, they worshipped, because they encountered the mightiness of God. In a place where they felt they could never worship, God met them.

That is what happens when true worship takes place. People experience the reality and presence of God. So what goes on when that kind of worship happens? What kind of worship would happen at St. Luke's this year that would give people not only a hope that they will experience God's presence, but an expectation of it?

I want to think about this experience of the exiles, because they experienced God's truth, and that truth changed them. This is what happens when we authentically worship, we are encountered by the truth of God. So let's consider for a few moments what this story of the exiles teaches us about worship and let's begin with this idea that **worship helps us see life from God's view**. That's what happened to the exiles in Babylon. They could only see life from their view, from their loss, their grief, their pain. But when they encountered God they saw life from a whole different perspective that changed them.

This is why worship has been a powerful force for black Christians. Spirituals like *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* capture the feeling of slavery and the despair, but yet sings "Glory, glory Hallelujah." Or *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. The melody holds the tears of the singer, yet the song pictures the other side of Jordan that is bright and hopeful.

Theologian James Cone once said, "Black churches are very powerful forces in the black community and always have been. Because religion has been that one place where you have an imagination no one can control."

When we see life from God's perspective we see what God sees. We see hope. We see possibility. We see what can be.

2. But worship involves something else. Worship puts God at the center. Worship helps us reclaim our true center.

I don't remember much from my high school literature, but I recall a line from W.B. Yeats's poem *The Second Coming*. It begins: "*Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon can no longer hear the falconer. Things fall apart the center cannot hold.*" The further and further out you go you can lose your center, and when that happens things fall apart.

Did you grow up with a thing called a 'record player.' Before MP3's or CD's, there were vinyl records. They had small holes in the center and on you record player was little knob that held the record firm. Now, if you didn't get the record placed firmly, then the record would wobble a little bit, and the needle would not rest securely, and it would scratch the record and warp it. Why? Because the record wasn't centered.

Our lives can look like that. When we get away from our center life starts to wobble and that's when things get warped. Blaise Pascal said "There is a god-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ." We all have a hole at the center of our lives that is meant only for God, but if we aren't careful we will try to fill it with other things. We're consumers at heart and we're always trying to consume what give us peace and satisfaction. Sometimes we even turn worship into something we consume. We say, "I didn't get anything out of church today. The music didn't do anything for me. The sermon was boring." But that shows a warped view of worship. We don't worship because of what we'll get but because of what we'll give. The word worship literally means "to show worth." What we worship says this is what matters most in my life, and we all, we all, will worship something. Because we are made with a hole in our center, a hole that is meant only for God. And when we come to worship focusing on putting God at the center, and giving God our praise and adoration, we find that no matter what is falling apart around us, we aren't.

Listen to a couple who has discovered St. Luke's during this pandemic and what worship has meant to them and their effort to keep God at the center...(video)

Worship Is Experienced in Community. The vision Ezekiel shared was not to individuals but a gathered community. Just as the exiles shared their laments together, they found hope together. Experiencing God's commitment to us is best understood in a community where we are committed to each other.

Did you know that this is where synagogue worship started? Out of the period of the exile. The word synagogue means "assembly." Since the people couldn't go to the temple, they began gathering in little assemblies of community to study the Torah and pray together. The Exile forever changed how the people worshipped. When the church began we used the same word to describe us. Church comes from the Greek word for assembly, *ekklesia*, except *ekklesia* means even more. It means Fellowship. It's not just the physical gathering of people, but people who are committed to each other, who hold each other up, who love one another.

I wonder how this pandemic is going to us, change what church means. And I have no idea. But I know this, if we remain committed to each other and we keep God at the center, however it changes us, it will be for the better.

A woman was struggling in her faith. She didn't feel God's presence like she once did, and she shared with a friend. The next time they got together, it was a Monday. The friend said, "Well what did you do this weekend?" The woman said, "I went to church for the first time in a while." The friend said, "Great, I guess you're feeling stronger in your faith." The woman said, "Not really. I just realized sometimes I need to lean on the faith of others."

If St. Luke's can be counted on as a community where people know they will be able to lean on the faith of others, we will never have a problem with getting people to come to church.

4. But there is one more element of worship that is so important to mention and its really about what happens when all these other elements occur, when we see life from God's view, when we put God at the center, and when we come together as community, **Worship welcomes challenge.** The Exiled Hebrews would come to understand as they worshipped and studied Torah, that many of their exile was the result of their own selfish actions. This would lead to repentance and change.

Worship should always include an element of confession and repentance but for that to occur there must be what John Wesley called *convicting grace*—being made aware of our need to change. That's never comfortable and is often painful, and we have become such a pain-averse society, the moment some Christians experience discomfort in church they are off looking for another community of faith to keep them comfortable. But that's not how we grow. We don't become better by staying comfortable. And if we don't grow, our world won't change.

Many of the problems of our world are because of EGO. You know the old acronym for ego, don't you? EGO stands for Edging God Out. We typically edge God when the only things we are open to hear from God is what we want to hear.

That's why St. Luke's has taken up a campaign this past year to be an anti-racist church, because we believe it is what God is saying to us and it's what our world needs us to be. We saw it again this week. Do you wonder why black America is outraged? Because early this year hundreds of guardsmen lined the steps of the capitol during protests over racial injustice. But this week, white people, some bearing arms, pounded their way into the capitol. There is a double standard in our country.

And God needs churches like St. Luke's, churches that are predominantly white and wealthy and influential to be willing to be challenged, even though its uncomfortable, because our world needs us to be God's agent of peace and justice. If we ever become afraid to speak out about wrongs in our world, because it might be political, then we will have hidden our light under a bushel. People who say the church is no place for politics

haven't read the Bible. Prophets like Ezekiel challenged kings on their policies and behaviors. And societies have gotten in trouble when the church gets quiet. This doesn't mean we can never disagree, it means we challenge each other based on what it means to be true to scripture, the mission of the church, and following WWJD—what would Jesus do?

I know I told this story earlier this year but it's a good one. It's about Ernest Campbell when he was pastor of a church in Michigan. Shortly after Kennedy was assassinated, a woman in the church learned about the wife of Lee Harvey Oswald and came to Campbell with a proposal to bring her to Michigan to complete her education, something she had hoped to do. She felt Oswald's wife was a victim too. SO the church did, and when news broke, you know what else broke loose. But Ernest Campbell felt it was his responsibility to write back to every person who sent him an angry letter. He ended them all saying, "The one thing you haven't told me is how what we are doing is unlike Christ."

St. Luke's, if we keep God at the center, stay committed to one another, and remain open to being challenged by God, I believe our worship we can always count on to give us hope.