

## Spirit-Inspired Worship

Luke 24:13-35

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Now on that same day two [disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles<sup>[f]</sup> from Jerusalem,<sup>14</sup> and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.<sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,<sup>16</sup> but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.<sup>17</sup> And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”

They stood still, looking sad.<sup>[g]</sup><sup>18</sup> Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”<sup>19</sup> He asked them, “What things?”

They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>[h]</sup> who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,<sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.<sup>21</sup> But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.<sup>[i]</sup> Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,<sup>23</sup> and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.<sup>24</sup> Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.”

<sup>25</sup> Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!<sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah<sup>[j]</sup> should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”<sup>27</sup> Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.<sup>29</sup> But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.<sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.<sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

<sup>32</sup> They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us<sup>[k]</sup> while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”<sup>33</sup> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.<sup>34</sup> They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”<sup>35</sup> Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

We’ve taken time this Easter season to talk through the 7 Marks of a Vital Congregation. I’m sure you’ve memorized them. So far, we’ve touched on:

1. Lifelong Discipleship
2. Intentional Authentic Evangelism
3. Outward Incarnational Focus
4. Empowering Servant Leadership
5. Today’s focus is on Spirit-Inspired Worship! Can I get an *amen*! Can I get an *alleluia*! Can I get a *praise Jesus*! Y’all don’t do that here? If I can’t get a full-throated “praise Jesus,” how can we possibly have spirit-inspired worship?

The staff was laughing the other day at these 7 vital marks—how theologically sound they are, yet every one of them is like a mouthful to say. There's no good theological idea that Presbyterians haven't tried to kill with too many words. I love words. I like icing, too. But you've had one of those grocery store cakes where the icing lady went crazy—Big blue flowers and things. There *is* such a thing as too much icing. There's such a thing as too many words in worship.

When you start thinking about what Spirit-filled worship might be, and when you start thinking about what we do here, and why we do it this way and not some other way, one of the first things that you realize is that most of us don't really think about worship much at all. When we show up here, for many of us, what happens here is habitual. We know more or less what to expect. We don't ask why we do things this way. It's like politics or hot dog-making—maybe what goes in to making worship is something you're better off *not* knowing.

Of course we're aware that there are lots of different ways people worship. There are lots of choices, lots of possibilities. Worship diversity is great—just don't bring it in this church. We like what we got. We Presbyterians have wordy liturgies that tend toward stiffness. Evangelical churches are like a Taylor Swift concert with a bloody Jesus. Episcopalian siblings have worship with fancy vestments and a fetish for British things. Quakers sit there in the quiet and do nothing... though I've been to plenty of Quaker meetings where someone got up to speak because they felt the Spirit moving and by the time they were done you were pretty sure it was not the Holy Spirit disturbing your quiet. Every worship service is quirky. Weird. We all just like our own brand of weird.

No matter what you do in the act of worship, one of the rules—the hard and fast rules of worship—is that space always wins. The worship space shapes our sense of God as much as anything that happens in it. I don't know how many of you have been in a cathedral and felt the grandeur. Or in a small 19<sup>th</sup> century rural church with white walls and clear windows. One of my favorite worship spaces is the Church of the New Covenant, completely round. You get a different sense of God if you're in a space with a massive stone vaulted ceiling and light pouring through stained glass, than when you look across the room and see the image of God on someone else's. I'll say it again—I love this worship space but we still want y'all to take out the pews and replace them with chairs so that every once in a while you can see a face instead of the mole on the back on that guy's neck.

With so much diversity in the way human beings worship, the kinds of words, and music, and art, and architecture, is there anything we can say about what makes worship good?

All I can tell you what we try to do every Sunday.

Our hope is that every worship here gives you a chance to encounter the Living God.

How on earth do we do that?

For one, your staff spends a lot of time planning worship. The themes and the sermons, the images and the music are drawn from our planning sessions. We think about all of the conversations we have with all of you and we think about what's on your mind and what's in your hear and we talk about what's going on in the world that requires a Word from God. We have to talk about mass shootings, and reproductive rights, and gas prices, and also high school graduations and health crises and new babies. For you to have a chance to encounter the Living God, worship has to be fresh. Hand-made from scratch. These worship services are not preservative-filled, wrapped in cellophane for extended shelf life. The church is not a museum, worship is not a relic, it's a happening. One of our congregation's first signs out front said "A Contemporary Church Following a Contemporary Christ Into a Contemporary World." Again, Presbyterians are a little wordy. But you get the point. If God is God, then is God found in the world, right now. Our worship should look and feel and sound like the world as it is right now.

That said, worship is not just looking around or looking at our own navels hoping to find inspiration. We rely, every week on our collective engagement with Scripture. The words of these old stories have legs. The characters in these stories speak to our life. The Living God appears to us through these stories and that happens during the alchemy of interpretation. You have heard me say this 1000 times—but we human beings are stories. You and I are made up of stories as much as we're made of atoms. There's nothing more nourishing or healthier, nothing more essential for you than to think about yourself as part of a great, large, expansive story. This great story of God begins in the beginning and ends who knows when and it is your story. Every week, when we open this book, it should show you your roots in the ancient past, and point to your branches that reach to the future. Interpretation alters time and it kindles your imagination, it lets you connect what was to what is to what is yet be.

I can show you what this means in this Emmaus story. It is a brilliant piece of writing. These two disciples—one is named Cleopas, the other is unnamed. Why? Because it's *you*. When you read this story, you are the one wandering away from Jerusalem, trying to make sense of why the Beloved Child of God would be executed. What happens? A mysterious stranger walks alongside you. And you start talking to this stranger. It is the power of conversation to nurture faith. The stranger talks to the disciples—and asks provocative questions—he wants to know what they think, what they see (see, God asks you questions, too). Then the stranger says to them remember—remember your own lives, remember Jesus, remember your story and what it says about God. Conversation, storytelling, memory—all of these are doors that open to the living God.

What happens next? The disciples invite the stranger to eat with them. This is where the disciples are no longer telling the story—through an embodied practice of hospitality, they now are the story. Their eyes are opened in the breaking of the bread and they see the Risen Christ! Why does Luke say that? Because his community is breaking bread together! He wants them to know that this story is not something that happened long ago. It something that happens again and again—our eyes are opened to the love of God every time we remember our story, every time we eat with a stranger, every time we break the bread the living God is here.

You gotta love the way Luke ends this encounter with the Living God, this experience of worship. Christ disappears. Poof! Why? Because these encounters with the Living God are ephemeral. You can't hold them. They happen, they're real. They're gone.

Worship is the weirdest thing human beings do—and we do a lot of weird things. It's completely impractical. It won't get you buff; it doesn't make you wealthy. It sure as heck isn't convenient. But it is necessary.

We belong to a great story. The living God—the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the God to whom we belong in life and in death, the God who holds the past and the future, the God whose love is the strongest force in all creation and whose love is in you—this God can be beheld, if only for a moment. When this happens—when worship is good, when it is Spirit-filled—our eyes are opened and our Spirits are enlarged and we are blessed.

Maybe you've never thought this much about worship. Maybe you don't want to know what goes in to the hot dog. I think a bit of awareness never hurt. Writer Annie Dillard wrote:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? 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.”

May it be so, Annie. May it be so every Sunday.