

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from October 18, 2020



Opening Prayer Dear Lord, we have gathered here or through media to experience again your never failing love and to honor your holy name. In this hour, establish us more solidly on the foundation of your Son Jesus Christ as we find it revealed in your holy Word. Amen.

Call to Worship (P: Pastor, R: Lay Reader, **RP: Reader with people**)

P: Are you prepared for worship? George Knight describes how it used to be... You would travel in groups from long distances. The Temple itself was a huge, massive structure, and spread out over a large area. You near the steps by which you will ascend to its outer gates. You are greeted by a minister with these words,

R: *"Come, let's sing for joy to the Lord. Let's shout praises to the Rock who saves us. Let's come to him with thanksgiving. Let's sing songs to him. (Ps 95:1-2 (ICB))*

P: As you begin to ascend the great stone staircase, you sing "At your name -- the mountains shake and crumble, at your name -- the oceans roll and tumble. At your name, angels will bow, the earth will rejoice, your people cry out, "Lord of all the earth, we'll shout your name, filling the skies with endless praise... There is no one like our God!" (Or some other song appropriate to the season) such as this one – *How Great is Our God....*

Song

How Great is Our God

The splendor of a King, clothed in majesty
Let all the earth rejoice, let all the earth rejoice.
He wraps himself in light, and darkness tries to hide
and trembles at his voice, trembles at his voice.

Refrain

How great is our God, sing with me
how great is our God, and all will see
how great, how great is our God.

Age to age he stands, and time is in his hands
 Beginning and the end, beginning and the end.
 Age to age he stands, The Godhead three in One:
 Father, Spirit, Son
 The Lion and the Lamb, the Lion and the Lamb.

Refrain

Name above all names, worthy of all praise
 My heart will sing, how great is our God

(Repeat)

Refrain

R: Now standing at the top of the staircase, you anxiously anticipate the opening of the great gates so you can enter. Another minister gives a short sermon and gets you to join in repeating a creed. Join me.

RP: “*The Lord is the great God. He is the great King over all gods. The deepest places on earth are his. And the highest mountains belong to him. The sea is his because he made it. He created the land with his own hands.*” (Ps 95:3-5 (ICB))

R: Now the gates open and you enter the outer courts -- a wide open space, roof overhead, supported by columns for walls, and you stand before a second set of gates. Here another minister invites you to approach nearer to your holy God, *Come, let's bow down and worship him. Let's kneel before the Lord who made us.* (Ps 95:6 (ICB)) And you respond by saying another creed with me:

RP: *He is our God. And we are the people he takes care of and the sheep that he tends.* (Ps 95:7(ICB))

P: You confirm that not only does God rule creation (in the first creed), you add that he is the Good Shepherd of his people, the God who knows and takes care of each member of his flock, the God who takes care of you!

R: Now as the next gates are about to open, the minister pleads with us-- You are about to participate in a solemn, sacred act of worship. So please, *Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts,*” (Ps 95:7b-8a (MEV)) The speaker goes on to talk about how in the past our ancestors refused to listen and so paid the consequences for not listening and for their disobedience. Therefore, when

you worship, anticipate him, and listen for him -- and if you hear his voice -- do what he asks you to do!

P: And if it were a movie, as this second set of gate doors open slowly, you'd see yourselves glowing from the light emanating from inside of that place; and powerful, grand, dramatic, emotional music would fill your ears and pull on your heart so it would well up, and you -- ever so slowly -- tentatively, you would move forward through the gate -- awestruck by the holy ground you are about to enter.

Theme

Today, Paul continues his first letter to the Thessalonians, continuing to assure them that he and his mission team genuinely cared for them, and that their message of what Christ has done for them was true. And, unlike others, he encourages them to continue receiving that message, not as Paul's or any human's, but as God's -- craving to enter his presence, and receive his presence with eager anticipation and holy awe, and the impact is that their lives were changed because they were imitating mature Christians who were imitating Christ.

Prayers

We too, are encouraged to become better examples of who Christ is and what he means for this world. We can't do it without him for Christ is our very life, and we need to cling to him. (Colossians 3:3,4) so let's enter "the gate of prayer" and prepare our hearts to sincerely crave God as the desert deer desperately seeks elusive water..."

Chorus # 2025 As The Deer (2x)

This week we continue to remember * Mother Amanda and baby Emily who are recovering from a very difficult birth. * Lone Bennett being cared for by her daughter, * a praise for Bill Martin who has completed rehab, * and Doug, who fell and had surgery trying to stop a brain bleed. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we come to you as our refuge and sanctuary from the struggles of our week, and we put our hope in you when despondency and despair persistently haunt our spirits. Comfort us and/or convict us in the stillness of your presence. For you not only sit on your throne above all, you have freely chosen to live and walk among us, even among those who refuse to acknowledge your presence. Continue to open your arms to them as you have to us -- freeing all of us from the chains of evil temptations and healing us from intended or accidental wounds, that

we may continue to take confidence in you alone, and in your saving deeds and providential power. It is with assurance of who you are and what you desire for your people that we place the requests and praises we named out loud or are in our hearts -- and we speak them from our hearts and minds to your ears and into your hands in this next moment of silence... **SILENCE** Now Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to you, that the whole world may be one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray,
LORD'S PRAYER

Bible Reading Hebrews 4:7, 11-13

The Call to Worship contained the first part of Psalm 95, a song that was sung as people traveled to worship and arrived at the Temple. The author of Hebrews picks up on those lyrics in chapter 4, verses 7 and 11-13 where he writes:

{God} again sets a definite day, [a new] "Today," [providing another opportunity to enter that rest by] saying through David after so long a time... "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." ... Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest [of God, to know and experience it for ourselves], so that no one will fall by *following* the same example of disobedience [as those who died in the wilderness].¹² For the word of God is living and active *and* full of power [making it operative, energizing, and effective]. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as the division of the soul and spirit [the completeness of a person], and of both joints and marrow [the deepest parts of our nature], exposing *and* judging the very thoughts and intentions of the heart. (AMP)

Hymn # 467 (1,3,4) Trust and Obey

Message ***"His Word at Work in You"*** **1 Thessalonians 2:13-20**

The Call to Worship ended with the instruction to trust and listen and follow the instructions we hear as we awestruck pilgrims were walking slowly toward the inner sanctum. In that setting, how could we not hear anything? How could anyone not listen? Or do what is heard? Of course, unlike *Indiana Jones*, *The Librarians*, *Warehouse 13*, and the all the rest, our lives don't have musical soundtracks and special lighting effects and carefully selected props that amplify the importance of our dramatic quest for God.

Therefore, the author to Hebrews reinforces for us how important it is to be a receptive listener -- to allow God's message to penetrate to the very core of our being where it can make real changes. The word interpreted "two edged sword" can also be translated as the knife used by priests on sacrificial lambs (offerings for the removal of sin's guilt) and also for the surgeon's scalpel (healing through excising what eats away at our spiritual lives). Therefore, both the Psalmist from the earlier Call to Worship and Paul, now in 1 Thessalonians, reminds us that while there are still plenty of God's people, some are not listening and displeasing God, killing the prophets and Jesus and running out of town mission teams who were teaching salvation and new life in Jesus Christ, and how we cannot afford to be those people. (See 1 Thessalonians 2:14b-16)

As we pick up the letter in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul gratefully writes: "*when you received the word of God... you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*" (NIV) They did not ignore, fight or reject God's word but allowed it to change their way of life. But the Thessalonian church could not isolate themselves from those who tried to prevent them from being saved.

They had blessed the mission team on their way out of town before they could be murdered by the mobs. They themselves got hauled before the city officials for welcoming them. Paul's plans to return fell through, and it was tempting for the Thessalonians to think that Paul and friends did not care as much as they said they did. They felt abandoned under the stressful suffering. Paul felt the same pain. In verses 17-18, he writes "*we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way ...*" (NIV)

Earlier in this chapter, he wrote that he was among them like a child, like a new mother, like a father, -- and now, being away from them, he says they were orphaned. They were a family – pulled apart. Like the church, he also felt a deep emotional pain of longing because of their separation. He assures the Thessalonians that they were with them in spirit -- and that the mission team intensely longed to be with them, and had made several efforts, but it just hadn't worked out. Paul affirms his genuine care and how much he treasured them in verses 19-20:

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. (NIV)

Now if we were in a movie the background music would become smooth, soft, sentimental – you can hear the violins, can't you? The camera would zoom in on Paul's face, now drenched with streaming tears. Unbearable emotional pain from physical distance and longing ache to be together with those whose relational bond inspired pride and joy and spiritual connection. (Pause)

Paul was concerned. The Thessalonians were new to the faith. Not much time to get grounded and grow. They could have been doubting Paul and his team because they could not return as planned. They could have been doubting themselves because they were suffering under the antagonistic threat of religious leaders. We will hear later that they also had unanswered questions about this new faith. Put it all together and Paul feared they might be doubting the genuineness of Christ and whether putting their faith in him was the right thing to do. He spends the early part of this letter giving them a litany of assurances that Christ, and their faithful response to him was genuine and powerful, and that Paul and his team truly cared for them.

Few things motivate us to excel, or encourages us through stressful times, more than knowing someone truly and genuinely cares for us without judgment, who knows us well enough to know when to advise, and when to be silently present and supportive. When to gently nudge us forward, and when to give us time to figure it out ourselves, to know that someone is truly happy with us and proud of us and are pulling for us and rooting for us to do well -- whether we are currently progressing successfully or are deeply struggling.

Paul reminds them that, despite circumstances that encourage doubts about the value of faith, leaders and self; they were actually very successful -- because the basis of success was not the absence of stress or opposition, or of having every plan come to fruition, or having answers to every question. The measurement of success is to not give up and to faithfully live as imitators of Christ and exemplifying that life to others. (See verse 14a, also chapter 1:7-8a) This happened only because they received, believed, and allowed Christ to change them into becoming like him.

In essence, we can receive the message of Christ, (the Bible) in two ways. It can be seen as ancient writings of people who lived long ago, or it can be seen as

writings inspired by God that when understood properly, are still relevant and authoritative, and revealing everything we need to know for salvation and for living a life of faith.

There is an old preacher's joke that says if your point is strong, say it. If it is weak, shout it, and if it is really weak, shout it and bang the pulpit. Someone else put it this way: The jackass brays mightily, but the forest does not tremble. The tiger's paw barely presses a fallen leaf, and all rush for shelter.

The heart and power of Jesus' message is not how loud it yells, how strongly it demands to be heard as true, its real power is that it not a human message, but it is God's message for humanity – a message that has real power to make a difference in our lives. The purpose of Paul's mission team, of the Thessalonian church, of the modern church is to be the faithful voice of God's redeeming love in each generation.

It is this difference that Christ makes in our lives that is our testimony of a legitimate faith. But, over time, some get familiar and comfortable with faith practices. For a few, familiar and comfortable is seen as the end goal of faith. There is no expectation of anything significant to happen, and they don't want anything different to happen. Our prayers, our Bible reading, our gatherings, our private devotions and public worship are always in danger of slipping into a comfortable, soothing, (some might even say a dull) routine -- that we do more out of habit or out of guilt or out of something other than passionate love for God.

And while it is true, as I said last week, that feelings or lack of them, are not by themselves a sign of faith or lack of faith, that doesn't mean we should not seek to experience God. Too often, too many have muted the inner voice that tells us we are about take part in a sacred act. We don't see the light beaming on us from the holy place, we don't feel the hairs on our arms and the back of our neck tingling, we can't hear the dramatic music playing, we don't feel our faces awe-struck... and like a self-fulfilling prophecy, all of our acts – are just acts. Nothing grows, nothing transforms.

But when we bring to the forefront an awareness that what we are clinging to are not only habits or duties but a God-given faith that we can receive and believe, then God's Word will make changes in us. The grammar of that phrase "the word of God, which is indeed at work within you" is passive and supernatural. It is not we who work the gospel; but God who works the gospel into us.

Anticipate God breaking in and transforming our lives. Our God-driven transformation and continuing growth is the strongest evidence (is what Paul is saying to the Thessalonians) that your faith is real. It is what he has done in your life and how he has changed you... from dark to light, from idols to the living God. That is the biggest sign that your faith is genuine.

Allow God to break in. Most of us can remember when we heard President Kennedy was assassinated. British novelist David Lodge was in a theater watching the performance of a satirical revue that he had helped to write. In one sketch, a character on stage was in an important interview, but demonstrating his nonchalance by holding a transistor radio to his ear. The actor always tuned into a real broadcast. Unfortunately, in that particular performance, the news broke about President Kennedy being shot. The actor switched it off, but reality had broken in. The mundane comedy ended in light of reality.

Turn it into a positive context -- allow God's reality to break in on the light routine of our life. Not just once -- it is not a one-time thing. It is a daily decision - a growth process that never ends. It is a lifestyle. It is only as we continue to exercise our faith in God that God continues to work in us. Or to put it another way, we cannot live today on the spiritual gains of yesterday.

A group of tourists visited a picturesque village. They walked by an old man sitting beside a fence, and one of the snooty tourists put down the village by mockingly asking: "Were any great people born in this village?" The village native replied, "Nope, only babies."

There are no instant arrivals in our world or at perfection in the kingdom of God. Growth takes time. Be patient with yourself and with each other as we urge each other to be the best we can be, and as we allow God's truth to work in us and take fruition in our lives.

We have entered the sacred. Does it feel like it? We heard it in the Bible reading. God has set a time to respond -- and it is today. Encourage each other while it is still today. Hear his voice and do not harden your hearts against it, but eagerly seek to enter the rest he wants to give. The age of when God's grace and opportunity to be transformed by trust in him is still available.

Continue to allow the word of God to sink into your life. Recognize that God's loving Word is a sword -- but in God's hands, it is not a battle sword used to attack and destroy, it is a surgeon's scalpel, penetrating, opening, examining, rooting out every last bit of diseased disobedience that is hidden in the depths of our thoughts

and attitudes-- removing them to bring healing and wholeness, and making our lives new and improved and better than ever before. Christ's words are not threatening words, but beautiful life-giving words that enter, and discern, and transform, and lead us to peace for our souls even as chaos and opposition surrounds us. Today, in awe, listen to his wonderful words of life. This week, as you open your Bible, as you open your devotional books, as you open your prayer time, remember you are entering – sacred moments. Listen for his voice, hear his wonderful words of life.

Closing Hymn # 600 Wonderful Words of Life

Closing Prayer Remain standing for prayer. Lord, we can face every joy, every fear, every struggle, every temptation, every opportunity for service because your word is actively working in us as you walk with us... Now as we prepare to leave this time of worship, let us go with the assurance that you always goes with us and guide us toward your light. As children of your light, then; help us to hold high the light of Jesus -- to be a beacon of hope to those around us -- that all may be drawn to Christ. Amen.

One verse emphasizes our “Children of Light” worship series. We will sing it as the beginning of our Closing Blessing, which I will then conclude with words.

Together We Serve, then

We seek to become a beacon of hope,
a lamp for the heart and a light for the feet.
We learn, year by year, to let love shine through
until we see Christ in each person we meet.

Closing Blessing It is not only as we get away with God that we enter sacred space, it is also as we move into our homes, our neighborhoods and schools and businesses. God's sacred presence surrounds us, speaking to us, hoping we will listen to his will and his way -- creating sacred space wherever we go in his name. Amen.

