

The coming of Jesus is such good news. As the virgin Mary's womb began to swell, her anticipation grew; she grew in expectation of her Son that was to be born, the Son the angel had promised. In many respects, the advent season is intended to cause this same swelling in our own hearts...an anticipation of the coming of Jesus.

The reason that we're still talking about this coming 2000 years later is because His coming was not only a one time event. He came yes, but He continues to come today. Jesus is just as present now by His Spirit as He was then; our God is living and active and His desire is to meet us where we live. He continues to come that we might be saved from sin and death, He comes to strengthen, to give us His peace, He comes to heal and transform us today.

Every time we talk about the coming of Jesus, we remind ourselves that He continues to meet us in the middle of our everyday lives, and more, we are promised that one day He will return in power and glory, and all that belong to Him will be caught up to meet Him.

So let this advent season be so much more than an anticipation of a few days off, or of brightly wrapped presents, or a delicious Christmas meal...let these days of advent stir deep within you a hunger for God, a desire to meet with Him, a desire for Him to move within your life.

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As we move into our teaching time this morning, I'd like to begin with a brief recap of where we've been. I don't know if you have noticed, but since the first weekend in September, we have essentially been teaching the same thing every week with slight variations. Our Big Idea has been that Jesus is big enough to

encompass all of life. We don't have to relegate Jesus to the sacred part of our life, to those 15 minutes when we pray in the morning...we can live a prayed life, listening and speaking with Jesus throughout the moments of our days. There is nothing we can't pray about, there is nothing we can't invite Jesus into; He is big enough to encompass our whole life.

The last five weeks we've changed the subject from prayer to worship, but essentially, we are painting on the same canvas with a complimentary colour. Our relationships, our work, our play, what we do with our money...all of these are connected to the wide world of worship. Now obviously, I'm not talking about a 1-dimensional, slimmed down, non-fat, decaf version of worship. I'm talking about a 3-dimensional worship that is big enough to encompass our lives.

A few weeks ago Pastor Keith quoted Henri Nouwen, saying: "If I cannot find God in the middle of my work—where my concerns and worries, pains, and joys are—it does not make sense to try and find him in the hours set free at the periphery of my life." If we cannot find God in the middle of our life, then He isn't big enough or strong enough to follow with the entirety of our lives.

We do violence to the biblical definition of *worship* when we reduce *worship* to a style of music, or to a time slot on Sunday morning. All of life is wrapped up in the word "*worship*". All of life can be lived in the name of *Jesus*, energized by the *Holy Spirit*, to the glory of God our *Father*.

With the recap now over, I want to return to a definition of worship we've touched on over the last few weeks. William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury writes,

***Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God.***

*It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness, nourishment of mind by His truth, purifying of imagination by His beauty, opening of the heart to His love, and submission of will to His purpose. And all this, gathered up in adoration, is the greatest of human expressions of which we are capable.*

This is a great definition of worship; we should notice right away that His definition is large and all-encompassing, just as God intended worship to be. But as I read this definition again this week, I noticed something was missing...there is no mention of others, no mention of God's people. Now obviously this little quote doesn't say everything William Temple believes about worship, but it struck me that I could embrace this definition of worship and live it out in solitary confinement.

Each of us comes into relationship with God the Father, through Jesus the Son; individually we must respond to His offer of forgiveness and salvation. Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a Big Mac. Having Christian parents, or grandparents, or being born in a Christian country doesn't make you a Christian; each of us, individually, must respond to the saving work of Jesus, brought about through His death and resurrection.

But, brothers and sisters, when we receive the salvation and forgiveness offered through Jesus, we are immediately ushered into the family of God. Look around you this morning, with God, there's no such thing as being an only child.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:23-25, New Living Translation.

Worship is not purely an individual experience; it's a family experience. Worship is the enjoyment of God, but equally it is the enjoyment of God *and* others, or maybe better said, it is the *shared* enjoyment of God *with others*.

When God's people gather, we do not engage in a series of religious activities (though I suppose singing, reading the Scriptures, and praying could be called that). When God's people gather, we engage in a series of relational acts that simultaneously take place on two planes: the vertical plane with God, and the horizontal plane with others.

And this is the focus of my teaching this morning: if worship is a family experience, an enjoyment of God with others, then what is going on when God's people gather?

**1. First, let's look at **why we gather?****

If you have your Bibles with you, let me encourage you to turn with me to Hebrews 10:23-25; that's page \_\_\_\_\_ in the blue Bibles right in front of you. May God's word penetrate our hearts this morning.

*“23 Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. 24 Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. 25 And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”<sup>1</sup>*

Why do we gather? Let me give you three quick points:

**a.** *We gather to encourage one another in the pursuit of Jesus.* The letter to the Hebrews, was written to a group of Christ followers in the midst of persecution. Because their suffering was so intense, they were thinking about abandoning their faith. And the writer of this letter says, *Don't do it! Don't turn back! Don't give up! Hold on to hope, hold on to the promises God has spoken...He can be trusted!*

**Illus:** The truth of the matter is friends, that we need one another. How many of you have ever crowded around a camp fire before? Have you ever taken a stick or a pair of tongs, and taken a live coal from the centre of the fire? The coal is literally on fire, but if you set it off to the side, apart from the other coals, in short order the coal has turned grey and it's flame has gone out.

We become like that grey coal when we neglect our meeting together; our thoughts, our desires, our affection for God can so quickly grow cold apart from the people of God. We need the encouragement of one another's faith.

**b.** *Second,* we gather because we need each other to understand the fuller picture of God and His kingdom. No single person can keep the whole picture of God in view all of the time.

**Illus:** Let me share a silly example with you. When I was twenty years old, I went off to Canadian Bible College in Regina. And within the first week of being at school, we had an school-wide worship night and a few hundred of crammed into a dingy room. As the worship team began to sing and play and invite us in, all across the room fellow students began to lift their hands in worship.

And immediately the thought came to me, *"I'm never going to raise my hands in worship. Those people look ridiculous...what d they think they are doing? Are they trying to give God a high five? Not only do they look ridiculous, they look needy...I'm going to keep my hands firmly where they are, at my side or in my pockets."*

How long do you think I held out? It was a month or two tops. There were many things I didn't understand about worship, and it was the people of God that helped me to see something that I had missed on my own. Jesus once said, *Blessed are those who recognize they are bankrupt before God, for they will experience His kingdom rule.*

The raising of hands in prayer, or worship has become for me an confession and an expression of my dependence on Him...it's one of my favourite things to do. And if it looks like I'm trying to give God a high-five so be it, if anyone deserves a high-five it's Him.

**c.** *Third,* we gather to remember who God is, and who we are. Without the people of God, it is so easy to forget or wander away from God, and our true identity in Him.

In John 8:44, Jesus describes Satan in the following way, *"When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."* More often than not, Satan tells lies about who God is, and about who we are; let me give you an example.

A little later on, we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper together. The bread symbolizes the body of Jesus that was broken for us on the cross, and the grape juice symbolizes His blood that was shed for the forgiveness of our sins; this meal is a beautiful reminder of grace. And yet, how often have you thought to yourself, *"Surely God*

*couldn't love me, I'm not holy enough, I've done too many terrible things. God must be so angry with me, I keep messing up. Maybe once I clean my life up a little more, than I will be acceptable to God; I just need to try a little harder."*

Lies...it's all lies. The truth is that God is love, and that He demonstrated the full extent of His love by sending Jesus to die for us, while we were still His enemies. The truth is that none of us can do anything that could make God love us any more than He already does, and none of us could do anything that could make God love us any less.

The Lord's Supper is the one meal we should all be racing to...if you've walked away from God this week, then come running to this table, eat and drink and be reminded that your performance doesn't affect God's love, you are welcome around His table, and as you eat and drink ask for His forgiveness and peace today.

On our own, we can be so easily deceived, but when we gather we remember that God is love, and that we are the Beloved.

Let's move on; we've looked at why we gather, now let's turn our attention to *how we gather*.

## **2. How we gather**

In Acts 2:42-47, we are given a description of the early church. In verse 46 we read, *"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts"*. Throughout the book of Acts we see this pattern: they met in larger groups in the temple, and they also met

from house to house. When the Apostle Paul wrote letters to individual churches, it would seem that the vast majority of them were small churches that met in homes.

And as you look at our gatherings, you'll notice a similar pattern. We regularly meet as a large group on Sundays, and we meet house to house throughout the week; both are important expressions.

There are some things that we can do in a larger gathering that are difficult to reproduce in a smaller gathering. For example, it's highly unlikely that Linda and the band are going to show up at your home with their instruments and the church's sound gear...it could make for a great worship block party but it would be difficult to reproduce.

But then, there are things we can live out in our home groups that are nearly impossible to live out on a Sunday morning. Where do we live out God's instructions to bear one another burdens, to confess our sins to one another, to honour one another above ourselves...a home group is the kind of place where a depth of relationship allows for these practices to be deep, authentic, and powerful.

Here's a picture of a few of the guys from my home group. As much as I love coming on a Sunday morning, my home group is a place where I can be myself, go deep, be prayed for, and receive the encouragement I need to keep pursuing Jesus. If you're not already a part of a small group in some form or fashion, you are missing out on what God can do through His people. If you're interested in joining a group, call the church office this week; we'd love to hear from you.

Before I conclude this morning, I want to address one last question: *what happens when we gather?*

### 3. What happens when we gather?

As I said before, when God's people gather in worship, we engage in a series of relational acts that simultaneously take place on two planes: the vertical plane with God, and the horizontal plane with others.

We gather to thank God, to adore Him, and to praise Him in song. We gather to surrender to His leadership, and to pray for His kingdom to come and His will to be done in our church community, in our city, in our country, and all over the world. We gather to listen to His word, to pray for one another, to submit to one another, to serve one another. All of this is a part of what happens when God's people gather.

And this morning I want to speak specifically about two key ideas; the first has to do with music, and the second has to do with the Holy Spirit.

#### a. Music and Worship

Colossians 3:16 says, *“Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 3:16, New Living Translation.

<sup>3</sup> The more literal translations such as the NASB and ESV do not have any break in thought from verse 20 to verse 21. In this way of thinking, mutual submission is a part of the overflow of being filled with the Spirit and is deeply connected to a life of worship.

Ephesians 5:18-21 says, *“18 Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, 19 singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. 20 And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [submitting] to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*<sup>3</sup>

Music is a beautiful gift from God isn't it? Music can move us, it can make us feel things, it can express things in a way that words cannot; music is powerful. But we can do great damage when we begin to equate a particular style of music with worship; I learned this lesson the hard way when I was 12 or 13.

**Illus:** There I was at Camp Kawkawa, seated around the camp fire with 100 other Jr. High students. The worship leader grabbed his guitar strummed a chord or two and launched into a song, “It Only Takes A Spark”. That song did something to me that few other songs have ever done...it made me want to grab a stick out of the fire, pierce my own eardrums, and end the agony.

And as ridiculous as that sounds, here's something more ridiculous...as I looked around the campfire the majority of students were worshipping, I mean really worshipping. What sounded like nails on a chalkboard to my ears, was bringing other people into God's presence.

I'm a big sports fan and so I love to hear everything I can from the wide world of sports. One time I was listening to a reporter talk about the biggest area of contention in NFL Locker Rooms. Do you know what it was? It's the music; the players constantly fight over what style of music gets played.

**Illus:** Unfortunately, many churches have waged internal wars in the name of worship, but underneath all the rhetoric, more often than not, what we find is a battle over musical preference. I can remember sitting in a classroom during my freshman year of Bible School and listening to Dr. Draper talk about the worship wars going on in Ontario in the early 1900's.

Some churches were being labelled as apostate; they were being charged with wandering away from God with the chief evidence being a change in worship style. These churches that were going over to the "**dark side**" were introducing a new instrument into their worship gatherings; do you know what that instrument was? The organ. The organ was an instrument that had been used extensively in the bars, and to bring it into the church was considered by many an act of apostasy.

Music is a gift from God, but we must not confuse certain kinds of music with worship. Paul's instruction really is heaven-sent, "*be filled with the Holy Spirit, 19 singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. 20 And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [submitting] to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" We need the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with

love for our brothers and sisters, so that we can sing and make music in hearts to the Lord, whether the musical style is our preference or not. It is the Holy Spirit's work within us that enables us to submit to God, and to others around us. And it is the person of the Holy Spirit that I want to direct your attention to as I close.

### **b. When we gather, the Holy Spirit indwells us.**

This is the most basic thing we can say about what happens when we gather. When we gather, the Holy Spirit is present among us. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, "*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*" Ephesians 2:21-22 says, "**21** *In him [Jesus] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22* *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*"<sup>4</sup>

Sunday by Sunday, I can't guarantee that my preaching is going to be good, I can't guarantee that you'll like our song selection, that you'll find a good seat, or that you'll be welcomed by 4 different people, but I can guarantee this: whenever we gather in Jesus name, the Holy Spirit walks among us.

The Holy Spirit is most present where Jesus is most glorified. Wherever Jesus is being honoured, obeyed, worshipped, and listened to, in that place, among those people, the Holy Spirit feels at home and comes to dwell...there His presence and power are made manifest.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:21-22; vs. 20 reminds us that Jesus is the chief cornerstone, it is upon Him that our shared life together is built.

We need to readjust our expectations. If we come to our home group or to a Sunday morning service, hoping to be amazed by the teaching or music, then our expectations are far too small. We need to come anticipating an encounter with God.

We need to come expecting that God might speak a living word to our hearts, that He might speak a word of direction into our lives, that He might speak a word of healing that will make us well. When God's people gather, the Holy Spirit is always present: He might move us to repent, or to rejoice, He might shower us with the love of God, or He might anoint us with His gifts so that we can come alongside someone who needs prayer, encouragement, healing or help.

### **The Lord's Supper**

Jesus is present, right here and now by His Holy Spirit. And I believe the question He is asking right now is: *my daughter, my son, what is it you need?* Do you need to know that you are loved? *Then look to Jesus.* Do you need to be forgiven? *Then look to Jesus.* Do you need healing? *Then look to Jesus.* Are you hungry and thirsty for God? *Then look to Jesus.* The broken body of Jesus is real food for our souls. The shed blood of Christ is real drink that will satisfy the thirst in our hearts.

This morning, as the gathered people of God, we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus. We remember that the Father sent the Son to die in our place, to bear the penalty for our sinful rebellion.

And in this confession, we remember that God is love, and we are His beloved sons and daughters.

At this point I would like to invite our servers to come forward and take their places. This holy meal is for all who have asked Jesus to forgive their sins and lead their lives; maybe you've never confessed your need for a Saviour before...make today the day and then come and partake of the bread and the cup. As the worship team begins to play, please come and receive.