

09.08.24 ~ Pentecost 16

“Is a Sermon Essential for Worship?”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Nehemiah 8:1-12 ^{NIV}

¹ all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”

¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Leader: These are God’s Inspired Words of Worship for the People of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 8:9-15 ^{NLT}

⁹ His disciples asked him what this parable meant. ¹⁰ He replied, “You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables to teach the others so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

‘When they look, they won’t really see.

When they hear, they won’t understand.’

¹¹ “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is God’s word. ¹² The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved. ¹³ The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don’t have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation. ¹⁴ The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so, they never grow into maturity. ¹⁵ And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God’s word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest.

Hebrews 10:1-4, 9-16 ^{NLT}

Christ’s Sacrifice Once for All

¹ The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. ² If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared.

³ But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. ⁴ For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁹ Then he said, “Look, I have come to do your will.” He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. ¹⁰ For God’s will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.

¹¹ Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. ¹² But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God’s right hand. ¹³ There he waits until his enemies are humbled and made a footstool under his feet. ¹⁴ For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.

¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also testifies that this is so. For he says,

¹⁶ “This is the new covenant I will make
with my people on that day, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds.”

Leader: These are God’s Words of Instruction.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, instructor, guide, creator, healer, leader, and strength, we thank you for this morning's study and worship together. We offer thanks for the many blessings of the week, even if unexpected things interfered. Help us to remember that it is through you that we find comfort, healing, peace, and grace. Through you and your words, we find our truth, spirit, and salvation. Through our worship, we draw closer to you; through our prayer, you hear our needs, and through your inspired Scripture, we hear your voice and direction. Please renew us and refuel us for the coming weeks. Instruct us as we study and listen. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Based on the definition of Worship from our first week: “reverent honor and homage paid to God or a sacred personage,” we explored the How and Why of Worship, and last week the purpose of ordinances as elements to enhance memory and ritual in worship services. So, this week, based on reverent honor paid to God, I ask you the question of our sermon title: “Is a Sermon Essential for Worship?”

For most churches, the answer is yes. For most congregants, the vote would not be so clear cut. In some Christian churches, individual participation (i.e., singing, music, readings, prayers, following along in Scripture, and ordinances) is how we as believers worship God.

Kinesthetic learners (who must use all senses to learn well) must be fully engaged in whole body activities to worship fully; they must see, hear, touch, taste, and smell elements of worship to feel like they indeed worshipped the Lord. To just **hear** a sermon does not engage a visual learner for example, they need to read it, take notes, draw, or keep the Bible open during the whole message. For visual learners, a sermon alone without pictures or a screen with images will be flat and not recalled. That is one reason I place images on our bulletins each week to reflect the content of my message. That's also a good reason to use hymnals or a

screen with the words, where Scripture can be visually read and heard for emphasis.

I am not a psychologist, but these remarks I know are true from my studies, many books about preaching and articles I've read, and from my own experience. I am a kinesthetic learner leaning more to the visual and touch senses, so before Seminary, I always took notes and still do in a teaching setting. Drawings and illustrations are helpful for my brain to retain the meaning of the Scripture or the sermon. I fidget with pen and paper sometimes which will help me focus but may drive someone else crazy because of the sounds! How do you learn? How do you receive a sermon each Sunday? Worship as a whole is very personal, but worship in a community setting has to satisfy many preferences and learning styles. The Holy Spirit's presence does help interpret the content as well. For us, I made an early decision to use worship as another teaching opportunity, and so we build on content each week, month, quarter, and year upon year. That's one purpose of having a theme; it helps to focus our learning and engagement as a whole community of believers.

In the Taizé style service, however, we chose to be more subtle. The sermons are internal to the music, Scriptures read, prayers spoken, and communion offered. There was no interpretation of the passages, so we indeed honored our Baptist distinctive of "priesthood of all believers." You were empowered especially by the silence to figuratively write your own sermon from what you heard, sang, prayed, and read. He has already written the laws upon your hearts; the interpretation comes from within. In preaching or writing sermons, there are options. God doesn't demand

one method; he does demand interaction with Scripture in his presence; this interpretation is called “hermeneutics”.

Over the centuries, interpretations have changed even though God’s word has not. Some pastors who preach interpret the Scriptures academically, intellectually, or historically; some interpretations are theological or philosophical (think in your mind of Augustine or Aristotle); others interpret Scripture and preach based on social and cultural comparisons to Biblical text (for example, an interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable may be called a social justice hermeneutic or the Exodus story a liberation theology hermeneutic). Some preachers prefer textual interpretation based on grammar and word studies in the original languages. Others are Christological in nature, how every Scripture intersects with Christ’s divine mystery, even the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures before Christ’s birth! Some sermons are narrative based—a storyteller’s perspective perhaps, like Jonah and the whale. Other pastors preach only in a prophetic or eschatological voice, interpreting all Scripture from a prophecy or end times prediction. You may have seen some of them on TV with a complex timeline and dates of Armageddon determined.

The three Bible passages today speak for themselves in our context. I do not need to dissect them for you to understand them. They show us that teachers were needed to interpret the scrolls even in Nehemiah and Ezra’s time; and that God’s word, no matter how astute the preacher or preparation, like the seeds and soils, can fall upon deaf ears or hard hearts and not be heard or heeded. The Hebrews passage is more transformative as it reminded the people that their worship was not of the law anymore,

but of Jesus, who came to fulfill the law. The old Levitical sacrifices could never really cleanse worshippers of their sins. Only the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ could make the people and us holy and saved. The new covenant and Jesus' blood shed for us makes no further need for animal sacrifices. Chapter 9 of Hebrews explains the differences between goats and bull sacrifices and Christ's. Animal offerings had to be repeated, whereas Christ's life was offered once and for all believers.

Even our banners preach a sermon to us. His resurrection and second coming are the sermon; ordinances, praises, prayers, and Scriptures are the sermon. Worship is how we remember we need Christ's forgiveness, and that need is weekly, the purpose of our worship together. Life's complications challenge our memories of Jesus and our relationship with God through distraction. The sermon, according to these three passages, reveals God's historical, divine word and instructions for daily living, his love for us, and his prophecy. Our thoughts are not his thoughts though, so we must wrestle with it weekly as we encounter both the good and evil of daily life.

So, in my opinion, yes, the sermon is a necessary and important part of worship to keep our minds renewed and fully engaged. We are to think about it all week, and study the Scriptures again after hearing the message. Preachers are trained and ordained to fill an interpreter's role; God does speak through them often. Writing and preaching the sermon, for the pastor, is a holy work, an exchange meant just for us at this time and this place in our context. It is not just a writing task, but it is a living exercise pondered all year, all month, and yes, all week before being committed to paper. Although there are other creative ways to receive the

divine word, the sermon is essential to worship, and so we'll be back next week! Amen! ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for these reminders that our comfortable worship could be more transformative to others. Guide our thoughts and creativity to draw others and ourselves closer to you as we meet in community together. Help us to find beauty in our worship and hermeneutics, so that your mind dominates our thoughts. May your Spirit empower us to lead others to you. Jesus, it is in your name we pray, **Amen.**