

Epiphany Worship Series—“The Essentials”

1 February 2015: Fourth after the Epiphany (Year B)

First United Methodist Church of Arlington, TX

“Why We Serve”

Preaching Text: Psalm 111

“We can’t expect the nation to operate by Christian principles...
but we can expect this of the church”
-(Philip Yancey).

+++++

May we hear the day’s lesson, Psalm 111:

- 1 Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- 2 Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.
- 3 Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.
- 4 He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful.
- 5 He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.
- 6 He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- 7 The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.
- 8 They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- 9 He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.
- 10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever (Psalm 111:1-10).

A true real estate entrepreneur may quote: “There are three things that matter in property: location, location, location.” The idea of location is also important in terms of understanding the meaning of an idea or experience. We call it context. When people claim that others “quote them out of context,” then they make a similar claim—although negatively. Whether the context is with respect to time or geography, context helps us understand implications that we might not have first noticed.

We are now in the midst of Epiphany as a season of the Christian year. This season is

sandwiched between Advent/Christmas, a time of watching, and Lent—a season of penitence. In Advent we practice watchfully anticipating the birth of the Christ child. In Lent we practice the spiritual disciplines: prayer, worship, fasting, giving alms, and so on. The purpose of spiritual discipline cultivates our inner being that Christ transforms with our salvation. In Advent we try to preempt the anxiety that waiting generates in even the best of us. At Lent we nurture the spiritual fortifications that help us wait for the next coming of Christ.

Psalm 111 is a song of praise for all of God’s wonderful works. Psalm 111 offers us an interpretative depiction of God’s nature that is both immanent (of the physical domain) and transcendent (otherworldly). The same God who is both above us and within us is also the God tangibly present and engaged in our faith community or congregation or church family.

We find one of the clearest examples concerning the difference in understanding God’s immanence and transcendence in 1 and 2 Genesis. In chapter 1, we read the short phrase “God said” ten times—in one chapter no less. This helps us imagine a God far removed from the terrestrial ball we call the earth. This God is transcendent. God from somewhere far removed says again and again “Let there be . . . light, a dome, the waters, the dry land . . .” you get the idea. It is a creation story that resembles an act done remotely from afar. This God is transcendent.

Yet in chapter 2 we read “*then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*” This depiction of God is a God that is immanent. This is a rendering of God who is near; a God who is essential to our very being. Our immanent God breathes into the human being’s lungs God’s wind, God’s breath, can we even say, God’s own spirit. The act of breathing in and out is where we get the words “inspire” and “expire.” This model of our understanding of God that is immanent.

In Psalm 111 we see God’s transcendent qualities as powerful deeds and divine covenants of compassion, faithfulness, and justice (see vs. 2, 3, and 4).

2 Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

3 Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

4 He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful.

Often we recognize that something outside our experience becomes a launching point for reflection on the God who transcends. How does a butterfly merge from being a worm in a cocoon? How is it that birds that follow a migration route that crosses an ocean may spend up to 100 hours or more in the air at a single time until they come to land? This God we contemplate created a world in which we find 85% of plant life in the ocean. This is a transcendent God—this God we worship.

And perhaps more difficult for us to grasp is that this is a God who is most interested in righteousness, grace, and mercy. When we see the earth from outer space as the astronauts have, it gives us a sense of God's transcendence. Perhaps an experience like this can give us the Hebrew Bible sense of the Hebrew word we translate as "fear." It really means a sense of "awe or reverence" of the power and majesty of God. The Psalmist gives us a good sense of wanting a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with this God who is a transcendent God.

At the same time, the immanent God is also one who breathes into us these divine qualities that make us human and separates us from other animals. While it is true we are like other of God's created beings—we are still different in that we use logic, make moral distinctions, and can be empathetic to the plight of others. Generally speaking—and I emphasize generally—animals rarely function in any way that violates the sense of innate survival that God programmed into most of God's creatures.

All this business about immanence and transcendence has profound consequences for our understanding of stewardship—or our managing the gifts God has given us. The same God who is both above us and within us is also the God tangibly present and engaged in our faith community or congregation or church family. With respect to transcendence, God has given us the great gift of



life, the world, and brothers and sisters with whom we are in relationship. At the same time with respect to immanence, we can practice those God-like qualities of love, hope, mercy, and so on... within the web of relationships we have with others.

During the season of Epiphany we may with profit reflect on God's character and our community of faith. Psalm 111 offers us a lens to see God's manifestations both in God's transcendence and God's.

David Neil Mosser, FUMC of Arlington, TX 76011