

**A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church
on July 18, 2021.**

CALL TO WORSHIP

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.
Isaiah 55:6

Today we continue our summer series on worship, as we turn our attention to the major elements that make up our liturgy. The liturgy begins with various actions that constitute a summons to worship.

The first act in our worship today was the ringing of the bell. Bells have played a very important function in Christian worship for two thousand years. In an age when people did not have watches or clocks to remind them of the time of day, bells from the towers of steeples told them it was time to come to worship. In various parts of the world, such as medieval Spain and the Balkans, where Christianity and Islam live in close proximity there are competing calls to prayers. Muezzins climb their towers to call people to prayer at the mosque, while bells ring out the summons to church. The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow tell us:

For bells are the voice of the church; They have tones that touch and search the hearts of young and old.

Clarence Presbyterian Church moved to this location in 1957 from the old building at Salt and Main. The only thing that they brought with them was the bell. The bell was cast in Troy, New York in the middle of the 19th Century. Many years ago, George Deal created an electronic device to ring the bell without a human having to pull the rope. This worked for many years. This device broke some twenty years ago and for a time the bell could not ring. Recently some of our talented volunteers were able to re-attach the rope to make our bell functional again. Jeff Deal was able to place a microphone in a place that makes it possible for us to hear the bell inside our well insulated building. During the last several years our worship has begun with the ringing of our bell.

This morning I would like us to focus on ways that the first several elements of the worship service help us to seek the Lord. The ringing of the bell, the prelude, the choral introit, the call to worship, the first hymn and the prayer of invocation do not seem to most of us to be important elements of worship. On our way to worship we seldom wonder what the call to worship will be like today. I have never had a remark positive or negative about a prayer of invocation that I have prayed.

These elements of our worship service play what seems to be a small role in the drama of worship, but this small role prepares us to follow the words of Isaiah **Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.** These elements serve to help us make a transition into worship on several levels.

When the bell begins to peel, we begin the process of seeking to transform this space from a gathering space into a sanctuary.

Many people enter the church early to meet and greet their friends and acquaintances. The level of noise from people catching up with each other is a healthy sign of community. We need the bell, the prelude, the introit and the call to worship as signals that this room is no longer a

gathering space in which we relate to each other; it has become a sanctuary where our focus turns to our Creator. We move from a horizontal focus to concentration on the transcendent.

These elements of worship are also designed to change the focus within the hearts and minds of each individual worshiper. As we gather in our pews we begin a transition. The sounding of the bells does not call us away from the world. Worship is not a time when we ignore the world and its concerns. The bells call us to worship. We come as we are. We bring with us lots of baggage. We come with mundane concerns such as what we are preparing for Sunday dinner to great troubles such as how will the pathology report turn out. We bring with us our whole being before God.

Thus we need help to focus our scattered thoughts and bring them before God. The early parts of our service slowly turn our attention from ourselves and towards Jesus. The various elements of the call to worship point towards the presence of God.

While these seemingly minor elements of every worship service seem unimportant they teach us a central spiritual truth.

I believe it was Woody Allen who once said, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up." This is true of work, school or parenting. If you merely show up to shoulder your responsibilities you may already be ahead of the pack.

I believe that the first parts of worship teach us that ninety percent of the spiritual life is showing up to worship and paying attention. So many passages of Scripture have the same message as Isaiah **Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.**

Watch at all times
Lift up your heads
Seek ye first
Prepare the way
Seek the Lord.

The central way in which we are to make ourselves ready to receive God is by learning to pay attention. The bells, the prelude, the introit, the call to worship, the hymn all call on us to pay attention.

When Isaiah tells us to seek the Lord, he is telling us to expect the presence of God. The English Poet William Blake one wrote:

They ever must believe a lie who see with, not thro', the eye.

I believe Blake's words remind us that in order to perceive the presence of God in the world we must expect to find God. The bare facts, which we perceive with our eyes, do not tell the whole story. We must see thro' our eyes to the truth that stands behind that which is apparent.

One idea that can help us understand this reality about the presence of God combines two truths. First, God is different from all that is created, and therefore God is in a dimension that is utterly inaccessible to us. The second truth is that we are able to have contact with God. These two truths seem to be contradictory, but we can come to understand how they are compatible by an analogy. Imagine a flat surface, which we would call a plane. Assume everything that we experience is on that plane, the human plane. This is the plane of our lives in which we

experience being born, living and dying. Now there is a second plane called the divine plane. This is the plane of God who is the creator of all things. Now if there is this divine reality, we could have no experience of it unless its plane touched or intersected our own. In that case that intersection would be a line.

This line is both fully a part of the divine plane and also fully part of the human plane. This can show us why faith in the reality of God has been easily eroded by the present intellectual climate. If one presumes that there is only the human plane then whatever others identify as the presence of God is always something on the human plane. Since it is on the human plane, it can be explained away as natural.

Many people say, "If they only knew Jesus in the flesh they would have greater faith." Yet the truth is that Jesus was fully human. He was fully a part of the human plane. Most of the people who encountered him in his life saw only a man before them. They saw a man of great wisdom, or a man who could heal or a man who threatened their power but still just a man.

It took the eyes of faith to perceive that Jesus was the Son of God. Remember that critical dialogue Jesus had with his disciples when he asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" It was Peter who said, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God." Jesus then replied, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Peter had been given the gift of faith so that he could perceive the reality that Jesus was more than a human.

To see thro' our eyes means to believe in the reality of the divine plane. To watch for the presence of God is to trust that the divine plane impinges on the human plane. To seek presupposes a faith in the reality of God.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.

To seek also means to learn some of the truths God passed down through history. When Blake says some merely see with their eyes he means they take in the bare facts. But the bare facts do not give us truth. We need a framework to help us understand our experience.

Let me take you back to the last play of the Bills' first trip to the Super Bowl. Remember the mere facts of the play. A bunch of large men lined up opposite each other. One group had on uniforms that identified them as the New York Giants; the other group had uniforms that indicated they were the Buffalo Bills. One of the members of the Bills bent over an oblong ball and threw it between his legs to another of the Bills. This second Bill placed the ball down on the ground and held it upright with his fingers while a third Bill ran up and kicked the ball up in the air. The ball flew through the air and went to the right of two upraised posts.

These are the facts that one would see with your eyes. They have no meaning at all in and of themselves. It takes an understanding of the rules and regulations of football and the game situation to understand the meaning of that play. Our emotions and intellect are not separate. Nothing could be more emotional than the anguished disappointment felt by the Bills fans as that kick went wide right, but it is felt only because they understood what the event was – a missed field goal that could have won the game. Although the intellect is not primary at the time anguish is felt, nonetheless the emotional response is possible only because the mind understands what has taken place.

The same is true in our experiences of God. In order for us to truly understand God's presence in the world, we need to know how God has been discovered in the past. We need to know something about God's character and purpose in the world.

This is one reason that we read the Bible. The Bible is a record of God's encounter with human beings in the past. We read these stories to discover how God has interacted with all those who have come before us. These stories tell us about God's very nature and his will for us in the world. These stories help to prepare us for our own experience of God. They prepare us to find meaning in our own walk with God.

Paying attention means

 Expecting to find God in our world

 Learning about how God is present and finally

 It means waiting for God to reveal God's self.

So, it is with us. We are called to watch, to wait, to seek Jesus' coming. In worship we seek the Lord.

Simone Weil was one of the most profound Christian thinkers of the last century. She came to perceive God's presence in many parts of our human plane. She came to experience God in nature, worship, human love and she even had a mystical experience of the Risen Christ.

She came to know God because she was ready. She expected his presence, she had learned enough about God to know how he acted in the past and above all she paid attention. She sought the Lord.

After her death the French Government honored her memory with a postage stamp. The stamp contained her picture and this quote:

Attention is the only faculty of the soul that gives us access to God.

What about you? Our call to worship tells us
 to expect to see God,
 to learn about him and
 to pay attention.

So, when the bell rings we come to worship. We come not as perfect people, but people seeking the healing presence of God. We will not pay perfect attention; we will not have a perfect worship experience every week. We just come as we are. When the bell rings I often remember the words, Leonard Cohen used to sing:

**Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.**

The bell calls us to worship, into the healing presence of God.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.