

The Theology of Worship  
Geneva Presbyterian Church  
Congregational Meeting  
January 25, 2009

By Reverend Anne Benefield

There is a theology of worship. As your pastor, I perhaps haven't spoken about it as often as I should have. Some Presbyterian pastors have a "teaching moment" in their worship services to talk specifically about things like the theology of worship, but we have had so many wonderful and complete services that I haven't had time for teaching moments.

There is a theology of worship both for the individual worship services and for the worship services throughout the liturgical year.

The theology of worship services includes four themes: gathering around the Word of God; hearing the Word of God; responding to the Word of God; and carrying out the Word of God.

When we gather in the name of God we begin with a prayer of invocation (invocation means asking for God's presence), sharing the peace of Christ, a call to worship composed of scriptures, and a hymn of praise.

We hear the Word of God in the children's story, scripture readings, and the sermon. We respond to the Word through our offerings, hymns, and prayers. We carry the Word out into the world by taking to heart the scriptures, preaching, and prayers.

You may notice that our order of worship isn't in the exact order of call, Word, response, and carrying out the Word. We have our offering before the scripture readings and sermon. This has been true in every church I've served. When I was in New Jersey, we tried to change it and it just didn't seem to flow.

In one church, they moved the offering to after the sermon. When it was the normal time for the offering, one little boy blurted out, "You mean the pastor is going to preach before he gets paid? That takes a lot of faith!"

While our services may not follow the prescribed order of worship, they always include coming together, hearing the Word, responding to the Word, and carrying out the Word.

In the same way there is a theology of worship marked by the liturgical schedule of the church year. The church year begins with Advent, a time of preparation for the coming of the Christ child. Advent isn't set up for merchants. It is a time for us to ponder what it means that the God of the universe became like us, arriving as a vulnerable baby parented by oppressed peasants in a backwater country.

We're called to wonder what would be a comparable place for Jesus to be born today. We're called to find a home for Jesus in our hearts, which often are inhospitable. We fill our very hearts with glittering images of wealth and success, not the humble power of a Savior as a child born in a musty, filthy barn where cows and goats were housed.

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Christmas Eve is the night when the miracle arrives. We believe that all three of our services are important, each for its own reason. In the afternoon at 4:00 p.m., the children share the story with pictures, carols, and laughter. Through this service we recognize the children of God, beloved just as the Christ child is loved.

Later, at 7:00 p.m., we have our traditional lessons and carols service filled with glorious music, the story of the birth from those who longed for the coming, like Isaiah and Micah, to Mary's annunciation and Joseph's dreams. We hear the story of the angels and shepherds. It is an exuberant, filled-to-the-brim service with many wonderful surprises and memorable moments. Throughout our worship together, we celebrate the occasion of the birth of Christ, fulfilling God's promises.

Finally, at 11:00 p.m., we quietly read the story, sing the carols, share communion, and pause to take it all in. With all the hustle and bustle of Christmas, this quiet time of communion and prayer is essential to balance our busyness with meditation. This is the time for quiet prayers of thanksgiving and sharing the Lord's Table.

The week after Christmas is the perfect time to hear the story and sing the carols, when our minds are not distracted by all the hubbub of the season.

The next important date on the Christian calendar is Epiphany, which marks the first time Christ is recognized by the Gentile wisemen as the divine Son of God. We celebrate with candles the light coming into the world and communion in the Lord.

The next few weeks on the church calendar are called "ordinary" time—a time to take stock and study the lessons of Christ found in the scriptures.

The Sunday before Ash Wednesday is Transfiguration Sunday. We remember how Jesus was transfigured, surrounded by Moses and Elijah, and recognized by God as His Son with Whom He is well pleased. On the mountain of the transfiguration Jesus is affirmed and strengthened for His journey to the cross.

Ash Wednesday begins with the ancient symbol of cleansing—the burning off of the old in preparation for the coming of the new. The burning off includes pain and sacrifice. The ashen cross marking those who attend the service is a visible reminder of our need for repentance and forgiveness. It is a day of fasting, prayer, and public confession.

Lent is six weeks of meditation, commemorating Jesus' approach toward Jerusalem. Knowing that Christ will die for us, it is a time of discipline. We are called to prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor. I often hear people complain about the idea of fasting. Some protestant ministers encourage their parishioners to add something good to their lives like prayer or community services. I know that sounds fine, but the idea of adding misses the point. We live

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lives that are too full of good things and treasures. To make time for prayer and service, we need to find time. That is why we are called to give something up so that we will have time for God.

Although we all love Advent and Christmas, the most important week of the church year is Holy Week. The week begins with Palm Sunday when we make the triumphant entry into Jerusalem with Jesus. Our joy on this day is tempered, even bittersweet, because we realize how fickle the people of Jerusalem are, and we recognize that fickleness in ourselves. If we believe that we would have been any more faithful than the crowds and the disciples, we delude ourselves.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week, Jesus taught in the Temple. We, along with the people of Jerusalem, are lulled into a mistaken sense of calm.

To really understand and faithfully celebrate Easter, we must mark Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Maundy Thursday is given its name from a shortening of the Latin word "*maundatum*" or "commandment." At His last Passover, Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, gives them a new commandment or *maundatum* to love one another, and institutes the Lord's Supper. In many ways, the Maundy Thursday service is a rehearsing of the story of Holy Week much as the Lessons and Carols Christmas service rehearses the Christmas story. In this service, we remember the most important teaching words of Jesus.

Easter would have no meaning without Good Friday. On the cross, Jesus lays down His life for us. He dies in excruciating pain, speaking forgiveness for us all and commending His spirit to God. But Jesus' spirit does not ascend directly to God; Jesus descends into Hell, which we understand as "separation from God." In this one act, He assures us that He will not leave us, even when we descend into Hell, separating ourselves from God.

The silence of Holy Saturday brings the reality of Jesus' death into our hearts.

On the first Easter morning, before the sun had risen, the women went to the tomb to anoint the body with myrrh and other fragrant spices. They discover the empty tomb! At our Easter sunrise communion service we remember the chill and wonder of that moment. Like Mary, we react with hesitation only to be quickly reassured that Christ has risen!

Later in the morning, we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord. With nothing but joy, we sing to the glory of God. Christ has overcome death. Christ has overcome sin. Christ has overcome anything that would separate us from Him. The idea is too wonderful for us to even grasp. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

From Easter until Pentecost, we celebrate the Risen Lord. On Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and to all believers. We are united in the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The great wind enfolds us, enlivening our faith. We are now equipped to carry our faith out into the world.

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In the weeks that follow Pentecost, we will celebrate Trinity Sunday and Reformation Sunday. We call the time between Pentecost and Christ the King Sunday as “Ordinary Time,” because again we study Christ’s teachings, which is the ordinary thing to do.

One more note: One of the loveliest things about Sunday worship is that every Sunday is a “little Easter,” because every Sunday we rejoice in the Risen Lord.

I believe in the theology of worship in which every service is necessary to our faith. At Geneva we have marvelous, moving services throughout the church year. When I first came here, I was surprised by the relatively low attendance for the special services, especially the evening services. The churches I served before had evening services during Holy Week with attendance that actually exceeded the typical Sunday morning. I thought the low attendance meant the services weren’t as powerful as they could be. I decided to make our special services better.

With the help of Jim Turk, worship and music leaders, Geneva Sanctuary Players, and the choirs, we have incredible special services. I’m praying that we can find ways to communicate how compelling our special services are. When you attend Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Sunrise service, your Easter will be so much more joyous!

We also have a variety of special services. Our contemporary praise services are held at 5:00 pm on a Saturday every other month. They feature contemporary music and drama.

We also use drama during regular services—sometimes during the time for youth disciples, sometimes on special Sundays like Reformation Sunday, and sometimes during the sermon.

With the renovation of the sanctuary, we gained a large screen which we use to share classical Christian art during the Advent and Lent seasons. The curtain and screen have made our annual multi-faith service with the Geneva Day School a welcoming time in which families from the Day School speak about their own faith traditions and share pictures of their holidays.

At Geneva we have been blessed with the presence of the Holy Spirit who enlivens our faith and encourages exploration of God’s gracious love. Let us respond with faithful worship Solo Dei Gloria—to the Glory of God Alone. Amen.