

Threats to Worship

Scripture: Ezra 4:1-5, 24

By Pastor John H. Noordhof
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church

October 16, 2011
Morning Service

People of God: Do we take worship for granted? I think that we do. Of course, there will be worship today. There always is on Sunday. Why won't there be worship?

And so, this morning as you got ready to come to worship, you didn't question whether or not this building would be here to offer a place of worship. You didn't wonder whether the pastor might have gotten sick and so couldn't lead worship this morning. You probably didn't consider whether there would be singing this morning, or an offering, or prayers, or a sermon. You assumed all the components of worship would be there.

We take worship for granted. On the one hand, that's a good thing. You can't worry about whether the church burnt down overnight. You can't fret about whether the pastor got sick—though maybe someone ought to have a sermon in his back pocket, just in case. You shouldn't have to go over the liturgy to make sure all the components of worship are there. In many ways, it's a good thing that we can take worship for granted.

On the other hand, maybe there is a danger that we take worship too much for granted. Perhaps there are some threats to worship that we need to become aware of. Perhaps we need to be on our guard lest we discover that biblical worship has been undermined, even taken away from God's people.

The Coptic Christians in Egypt cannot take worship for granted. Egypt has the largest Christian population in the Middle East, comprising about ten percent of the population, about 8 million people—a significant minority. Last Sunday, a group of Coptic Christians protested the burning of one of their churches. Those protestors were attacked, with involvement by the army, and at least 26 were killed. This one episode is just the latest in a long history of persecution and discrimination faced by Coptic Christians. They do not take worship for granted, but face real, deadly threats to the practice of worship.

So it is, in our text for this morning. Two weeks ago, when we considered Ezra chapter 3, we discovered how worship was restarted in Jerusalem, after a seventy-year absence. The altar was rebuilt and the sacrifices were offered up to God, once again. The foundation of the temple was laid, leading the people to sing praises to the Lord. Worship, according to the Mosaic rules and regulations, was restarted.

But now, in chapter four, this worship was threatened by outside forces. There was an attempt to stop the rebuilding of the temple. An attempt that was successful. The restoration of worship came to a grinding halt.

Now at first glance, you might wonder why it had to be that way. After all, the chapter opens with an offer to help with the rebuilding of the temple. This offer comes those who were living in the city of Samaria, which was to the north of Jerusalem and would have been the closest city to Jerusalem. They said, “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.”

That’s an offer, too good to refuse. The people in Jerusalem could have used all the help they were given. After all, they were struggling economically, since everything had to be started from scratch. And yet, the leaders in Jerusalem refused this help, quite bluntly and forcefully: “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it.”

Why? Why was this offer refused? Why was this offer, indeed too good to be true? Why was this offer, itself, a threat to worship?

Well, as the opening phrase of this chapter indicates, this offer came from those who were “enemies” of God’s people. Why were the people of Samaria, viewed as “enemies”? Why were they a threat to worship?

Because they were a people who mixed religions together. As they themselves said, they were brought to the area by the King of Assyria. Just as God’s people were deported from Jerusalem and sent into exile, so other people were deported from their land and brought into the northern areas of Israel. They mingled and intermarried with God’s people who were left behind. As they intermingled, they also mixed religions.

As a result, while they did indeed started to worship the God of the Israelites, they continued to worship their own pagan gods as well, in clear violation of the First Commandment. In addition, their worship of the Lord was not in accordance with the Mosaic rules. They said they had been sacrificing to the Lord God. But that should have been impossible as the altar and the temple was destroyed—the only acceptable place for God’s people to sacrifice to God. Their so-called worship was not biblical.

That's why their offer to help was refused. Their participation would have been a threat to purity of worship. They would have introduced pagan ideas and practices to the worship of the Lord. It would have undermined the very project they wanted to help—which probably was their intent. They really wanted to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem. And so, wisely, their offer was refused.

Of course, they responded with anger. Their true colors and intent get revealed. They began a program of discouragement and disinformation. They pull some political strings and the net result is described in verse 24: the rebuilding of the temple comes to a standstill. The restoration of worship, according to the Mosaic system, is threatened and halted.

Our worship doesn't follow the Mosaic system. Jesus fulfilled that system. His sacrifice put an end to the need for an altar and a temple. A sacrifice we remember today through the celebration of the Lord's Supper. And so, we are still called to worship the Lord our God. Worship remains a high priority for God's people. Worship that is to follow the biblical directives for worship.

Is our worship threatened, or undermined, by outside forces, as it was in our text? Clearly, there are places in the world, like Egypt, where there are overt threats to worship. Churches are being deliberately burnt in order to stop worship. Believers are harassed in coming to worship. We, thankfully, do not face that kind of hostility.

But there are trends in our society that threaten to undermine biblical worship. They are not as overt as burning down a church. They are much more subtle. But perhaps in the long run that can be as dangerous to worship as any overt threat. Let me identify three trends in our society that seek to re-shape worship in an unhealthy way.

First of all, there is the push to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. One of the great values of our society is "tolerance." We need to be tolerant of everyone—meaning we need to be accepting of everyone; never being judgmental. We need to be open to all people, and to all religions. One cannot be exclusive, but need to be inclusive of all.

Now, while we do need to be tolerant and open to others, there is a limit to that tolerance and acceptance. We need to realize that worship is an exclusive activity. In worship we are making that claim that the God of the Scriptures is the one who ought to be worshipped. Our Triune God alone deserves the worship of his image-bearers.

While we will tolerate the existence of other religions, while we will defend the right to religious freedom, in our worship we are making an exclusive claim: our Triune God is the one who should be worshipped. The Bible alone is the Word of God. In partaking of the Lord's Supper, we are making an exclusive claim: namely, that Jesus alone is the one who can save humanity from our sin.

That's why this meal is reserved for those publicly confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and are part of his family, the church. It's an exclusive meal.

This exclusivity is offensive in today's society. As a result, the temptation is there to water down the exclusivity of the gospel and to become more inclusive. Yes, maybe as an ethnically based church we do need to be open to others, but there is a limit. Worship is exclusive.

Secondly, there is a push for worship to be more entertaining. Here, we see the impact of a world shaped by TV and the entertainment industry. The classic book on the impact of TV upon culture in general is Neil Postman's book, *Amusing ourselves to Death*. He shows how TV affects how we think and process information. Because TV presents visual images, very quickly, it's not best media in which to learn about what's happening in the world. Because TV seeks to entertain, it makes us into passive beings.

All this impacts worship. The push is on to add more visual components to worship, to make worship more entertaining; to make worship more fast paced.

And while indeed, we do need to make sure worship connects to people and is relevant to our lives; we need to remember that we are people of the Book, not the Video. The fact that God has revealed himself through the printed page and not the video screen impacts how we worship. It means that the reading of the Word and the preaching of the Word remain central in worship. The visual aids God has given are the sacraments: baptism and Lord's Supper.

We also need to be cautioned about making worship entertaining, as if the church could ever compete with Hollywood. I have no special effects department to dazzle you with. But I'm not here to entertain you. We're here to enter into the presence of our God through song, prayer, word and sacrament. It may not be as fast paced as any TV show, but it will offer more depth and meaning.

Third, and closely related to the second trend, is the push to satisfy the consumer. In our consumer society, when choices are so great and loyalty to brands or businesses have greatly declined, it's easy to view church and worship as just another consumer item. It's easy to get into the "what's in for me" mentality.

But worship isn't really about us, but about God. And it is God who uses worship to shape us into the people we were called to be. That means we come to worship, not just whenever we feel like it. In fact, it's when we don't feel like coming to church that we must need to come in worship so that we can get re-oriented in our lives.

And so, worship in our society faces threats to its integrity and its purpose. These threats may not be as overt as in Ezra 4, but they are still real. Now the chapter ends on a sour note—the rebuilding of the temple comes to a standstill—but it is not the final word on the matter. There is a hint the work will resume. Because God will not allow worship to cease.

Today, it is easy to become negative about the spiritual state of the church in our society. Numbers are declining, churches are closing their doors; others have been affected by the trends of our society. But worship does still continue. And in the end, the worshipping crowd before the Throne of the Lamb, in the Book of Revelation, is a number no one can count. Amen.