

When Jesus Is the Worship Leader

Reformation Day 2010

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Bible Text: Hebrews 8:1-2

Preached on: Sunday, October 31, 2010

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I'd like to ask you to turn again in your Bibles to the letter to the Hebrews and I want you to read there both the text that's printed in the order of service this morning from chapter 8 and then to move back a little and read some verses from Hebrews 2, from verse 10 through to verse 18. You'll find that passage on page 1,002 of the Pew Bible and as you're turning there, let me simply say to you what a joy it is for me to be here again at Tenth Presbyterian Church. Many of you have no idea who I am and I have no idea whom any of you are but years ago Tenth Presbyterian was very much my American home church and it's always a delight to be able to come and worship with you and I'm grateful to my friend, Dr. Jones, who always comes up with some new arrangement of "Come to the Waters" whenever I'm here because he knows that's, I think, my favorite hymn of Dr. Boice's. You will think that I am a fool rushing in where angels fear to tread by speaking this morning about the subject of worship since Dr. Jones has written the final word on worship but just to remind him of the challenges of that, I told him this morning that it is a question what the difference between an organist and a terrorist is and the answer to that question is: you can still negotiate with a terrorist. So, nothing daunted by his expertise in these areas and encouraged between the distance between us at the moment, I want to turn to this subject of worship.

It will help us, I think, if we think of Hebrews 8:1-2 as a kind of clue to what is being said in Hebrews 2. Those of you who love reading crime novels often come to a place in the novel where you read something and you, "Ah, now," I connect that with what was said before. So, Hebrews 8:1-2, "Now the point in what we are saying," always great when preachers say that, "the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." He's speaking about the Lord Jesus, "a minister." The word is the Greek word from which we get "liturgy" or "liturgist" and so I want to translate that, "the liturgist or the worship leader." "We have such a high priest, a worship leader in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man."

Back to Hebrews 2:10, "It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." He's describing what the Father has made the Lord Jesus to us. "For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin," perhaps even belong to the

same family, “That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, ‘I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.’ And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again, ‘Behold, I and the children God has given me.’ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation,” an atoning sacrifice, “for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

One of the easiest ways to cause discussion if not heated disagreement in a room full of contemporary Christians is to ask somebody in the room about the worship style in the church that they attend. It very rarely fails to produce animated discussion; people even speak today about worship wars. But it’s fascinating to ask a second question in the same room, to go around the room and say to Christian believers, “Could you describe the two or three worship services that have made the most indelible and the most profound impression on you and on your Christian life?” And usually, under those circumstances, you will discover that some people who worship as we are worshipping today will bring forward totally different kinds of worship services: perhaps in small places or with persecuted Christians, or in another country in a different culture. And some who customarily worship in very simple surroundings may use very different music from the music that we use will say to us that one of the most impressive experiences of worship they have ever known has been on some grand occasion where the liturgy has been profoundly disciplined and very different from their ordinary experience.

Then if you ask a third question, it’s the answer to the third question that’s really most significant of all: “What is it that made those services so significant in your Christian life?” The real answer to that question is that Christ was wonderfully present. When I was a very young Christian I used to go to a Bible class early on Sunday afternoon and we always started in the same way: we sang together “Jesus stand among us in your risen power, let this time of worship be a hallowed hour.” That was immensely significant for these Hebrew Christians. Some of them had been accustomed to very high church worship and liturgy. They had had a temple. They’d had priests. They’d had an orchestra. They’d had choirs. They had had large congregations. They had had visible sacrifices. And now they’d been excommunicated from all that and they’re meeting in simple homes and sometimes outside where they can gather together and some of them are longing for those days as sometimes people when they move church from a place where the worship is exhilarating to a different context, long to return to the past. The author of Hebrews is saying to them, “Fix your gaze on what God has given you in the gospel because what God has given you in the gospel is nothing less than the very presence of the Lord Jesus Christ among you as the liturgist, as the worship leader of the congregation. And if you gaze not on the things that are seen but on the one who is unseen, who keeps his promise that where two or three gather in his name he will be there in the midst of them, then it

will dawn upon you that you have privileges way beyond anything you ever knew in the past.”

What is helpful for us to understand is: Hebrews 8:2 gives us a clue to the way we can think about Jesus in chapter 2. What is so fascinating to see is some of the ways in which we learn how Jesus stands among us. What is he doing that makes our worship not only honoring to God but profoundly transforming in our own lives? And means, as Paul says to the Corinthians, “If an unbeliever comes in, he may feel himself to be pressed down to the ground and to say, Surely, God is in the midst of these people.”

Well, I want to simply loosen some of the threads of this tapestry picture of Christ that we have here in Hebrews 2 to help us think about the privileges that are ours as the Lord Jesus stands among us as the worship leader of our congregation. The first is this: the Lord Jesus gathers us together and brings us to God as his own family. Look at the words that are cited in the 13th verse. They come from the prophecy of Isaiah. The author pictures Jesus saying to his heavenly Father, “Here am I and the children you have given me.”

I wonder if you know what the basic New Testament picture of the church is? Many people say it's the body of Jesus Christ but that can't be the central picture in the New Testament for the simple reason that only Paul, of all the apostles, uses it. No, the central picture of the church in the New Testament is that we are the family of the Lord Jesus Christ and we know that's central because the privilege that is central to the gospel is that through Jesus Christ we may say to his Father what he says to his Father, “Abba, Father.” So, it's one of the ways in which you tell the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, isn't it? Even the religious non-Christian who says the creed, sings the Gloria, knows how to say the Lord's Prayer, but in crisis never rises above saying, “Oh God,” never, “Abba, Father.”

The picture that Hebrews gives to us is it uses the Old Testament Scriptures as of Jesus leading us in our worship to the heavenly Father and saying to him, “Father, Jesus stands among us saying, Father, here am I and the children you have given me.” That means, of course, that there are always two things characterized: the worship in which the Lord Jesus is present first but we are filled with an awe that stuns us that we should have such a privilege, we who are made of the dust should have such a privilege of being gathered into the family of God. Not only on earth but since our Lord Jesus has reconciled things on earth with things in heaven, the picture we're given in Revelation 4 of John being caught up into heaven to worship and there seeing the other branch of the family in heaven surrounded by members of the family branch who have lived here on earth and having that sense that in worship he is being caught up in the Spirit and is actually sharing, surrounding the worship of heaven and that the center of the throne is the Lamb who was slain for us, saying to his heavenly Father, “Father, the family in heaven and the family on earth are gathered to worship you.”

That's why sometimes we go home saying, “Wasn't it heavenly at Tenth this morning?” Because in a sense, that's where we have been and so we're filled with awe and yet at the

same time, we are filled with a sense of sweet fellowship and love and no stuff in us in our worship. I had a lady once who said to me, “We like stuffy here,” and since I was middle-aged, I thought I should raise myself to my full height and I did and I said, “You don’t think the Lord Jesus likes stuffy, do you?” You see, it’s the combination, isn’t it? It’s the combination of what the world can’t really understand or grasp that is so astonishing about our worship. This great sense of awe that fills our souls not because we’re crushed to death because the law has beaten us down, but because we’ve been brought into the presence of our Father and holy angels and cherubim and seraphim surround his throne and at the same time there is this sweet intimacy and fellowship because we love him and as he’s drawn us near to himself, he’s drawn us near to one another.

So, the Lord Jesus gathers us as his family. Second, notice, the Lord Jesus leads us in our praises. You notice the quotation in verse 12, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation,” this is the Lord Jesus speaking, “I will sing your praise.” Now, if your eyesight is still good enough and you look down to the bottom of the page, you’ll see in tiny letters that this is a citation from the 22nd Psalm and most of us know the 22nd Psalm and we know the first verse because it’s the one Jesus was meditating on on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You need to read on in that Psalm because it takes us from our Lord’s passion through our Lord’s resurrection to his ascension, to his heavenly session and reign and it’s from that part of the Psalm that these words come. Jesus, our ascended Savior, still wearing our humanity as our representative before the heavenly Father says to his heavenly Father in the midst of the congregation, “I will sing your praise.”

Years ago, I think it must have been about 1983, I turned on the television set here in Philadelphia and I saw it was the Day of Atonement and I watched a service from the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan. The cantor had a voice to die for; it was magnificent. Absolutely magnificent and the camera panned around to these four bedecked ladies in all their opulence and you could see on their faces they were luxuriating in the song of the cantor but none of them was singing alongside him and that’s the privilege of the New Covenant. In the New Covenant, the Lord’s people are invited to sing along with Jesus and you know what it’s like to stand beside somebody who can really sing, don’t you? You get such help by the coverage that voice gives to you that you are bolder to sing?

So, we are encouraged to sing with the Lord Jesus knowing that he has covered not only by his shed blood our sins, but by his voice he covers even our tunelessness and enables us with heart and soul and voice, mind and all our strength, to bring our praises into the presence of the heavenly Father.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, we know that Jesus used the Psalms and that’s so instructive for us not only because we do sing the Psalms, we are a dying breed, alas, who sing the Psalms. Because Paul says, “Be filled with the Spirit singing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” There’s a lot to learn about our worship from the Psalms. I choose the hymns in our own church whenever I’m preaching and sometimes I come to a hymn and

it's only got two verses and I can't possibly sing that here, two verses? Not in our church and then I remember there are Psalms with two verses that Jesus would sing. Then there are some hymns and songs that are so full of I, I, I, I, that there is something in me, Presbyterian as I am, that reacts against that center in I and then I turn to the Psalms and some of them are full of I, but the key is, they're full of I but they're not centered on me. And some of the Psalms don't always direct God at all but direct the saints and so I learn there is a balance in praise and I learn from the hymnbook that Jesus used that every emotion and affection in my being has to be released and praised: sorrow and lament, joy in praise, light in perplexity. Because when Jesus leads the singing, what he's doing is not only helping our minds to think clearly, he's helping our whole being to express ourselves in the presence of his heavenly Father and he says, "Here what a way to think about your worship. Here am I and the children you have given me. I will in the midst of the congregation, sing your praise."

But there is a third thing here that you would understand is of particular interest to me but I hope also to you: that the Lord who gathers us as his family, who leads us in our praises, who is said here in Hebrews 8 to be the liturgist in the church is also the one who preaches to us from God's word. You notice those words in verse 12, again a quotation from the 22nd Psalm, "I will proclaim, I will tell of your name to my brothers." Now, why is that so significant? Because, of course, Christians are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and that's the whole of the Christian life. The whole of the Christian life is coming to understand how I got to be baptized into that name, to a fellowship with God the Trinity. And who I am now that I have communion with God the Trinity. And how I'm going to live as someone who has the name of the blessed God written over my life because I've been brought into his family. Baptism is a kind of adoption service in which we are taken out of our own name by nature and placed into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every Bible based sermon you ever hear at the end of the day is simply a declaration of the name to the congregation and what we're learning from Hebrews' use of this text is: when the word of God is preached in the power of the Spirit of God, the person who really does the preaching is the Son of God.

That is our experience and that is my comfort. I go into the pulpit with a message which seems to me to be so serious that it will rip up our consciences and I catch sight of one and another in the congregation: a lady who has lost her husband a few weeks ago, a man who is going through serious health difficulties, parents who are worried about their son in Afghanistan and inwardly I cringe and say, "O Lord, why this word for these people?" And yet, these same people may come to their preachers and say at the end of the service, "That was such a comfort to me. Such a help to me." What explains that mystery? It's this: that when the Spirit takes up the word that's preached, the accent of the preacher goes quiet and the accent of Jesus Christ is clearly heard and because we hear Christ speaking to us and because Christ is not only the one who touches our consciences and shows us our guilt but he's the same Christ who comforts the afflicted, who upholds the weak, who gives wisdom to those who are confused because we meet with Jesus Christ when he speaks. That's why it doesn't matter where we come from in the word as long as we get to Jesus Christ in the word and hear him speak, "All is well."

Some of you who are students and perhaps someone who is in your dorm or a roommate has fallen in love: a young man with a young girl, young girl with a young man. They are out for hours in the middle of the day and they come back and you say, "Hey, what were you doing?" "Well, we weren't doing anything. We were just being with one another." "Talking for four hours, you were talking? You don't know enough about anything to talk about it for four hours." What's happening? It's soul engaging with soul. It's lover discovering loved one. That's our excuse for slightly longer sermons, isn't it? Because we are not transferring information, we are communing with the Lord Jesus Christ and we're experiencing what he describes in John 10, "My sheep hear my voice and I call them by name." And the human accent of the preacher goes quiet and the divine accent of the Savior is heard and we begin to experience the kind of thing that couple experienced on the road to Emmaus and we say, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he walked with us on the way and as he opened the Scriptures to us?"

It's wonderful isn't it? That the profoundest counseling sessions we Christians can ever experience are when Jesus comes and preaches his own word to us. And that brings me to the fourth and the last thing: Jesus gathers us as his family, Jesus leads us in our praises, Jesus preaches to us from God's word, and all of these things assemble together because Jesus Christ is here to meet us in all of our need. That's one of the things Hebrews is saying, isn't it? It says he partook of our flesh and blood in order to destroy the power of the devil over us, with all the fears that the fear of death has injected into our lives and so we meet with Jesus Christ and our fears are calmed. He says, "Peace. Be still," and rebukes our fears and he comes to, as the passage goes on to say as one who is merciful to us, sees us in our brokenness and our need and shows us his mercy and he's faithful to us. He'll never leave us. He'll never forsake us. And he's dealt with my guilt. And he's dealt with my shame. Because he suffered when he was tempted, he understands me. He knows what I'm going through and he's here to be an all-sufficient Savior and friend to me so that when he preaches his word, through that word he points us to himself and we learn again and again and again and again that Jesus Christ is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him.

Years and years ago I was a very young minister and I was invited to speak at a large gathering of young people and I knew the place where they were meeting. It was in a large suite of halls. I thought I knew the hall in which they would be meeting. I threw open the doors expecting to see a congregation of young people eagerly singing and waiting to be taught from God's word and standing right in front of me about ten feet away was a gigantic Greek Orthodox priest swinging a huge censer and filling the room with incense. I had arrived in the middle of a Greek Orthodox service. I got such a shock. I immediately closed the doors and now for 39 years, I've regretted not opening them again because for 39 years there has been this thought in my mind: did I really see that? Or was I imagining something?

You know, there is something about true worship that's like that, isn't there? Can it really be as glorious as this? A marvelous reality of the gospel is you're not imagining what you experience at Tenth Presbyterian Church because Jesus is standing among us. And if you're a total stranger this morning to this church and to Christian worship and to reading

the Bible and to praising God and you've come in here and thought to yourself, "I didn't think church was like this," this is the reason: because Jesus is standing among us in his risen power and he is able to be our Savior and our Lord and you can trust him as you're surrounded today by those who have trusted him many years. That's why some of the most wonderful words in the English language are surely the words "let us worship God."

Heavenly Father, thank you that this very truth which we hear is also the truth that we experience together and as you have given us that privilege, we hunger and thirst for more of it that the Lord Jesus Christ might be exalted and worshiped and lead our worship and that we may be filled with a gracious sense of awe and a wonderful sense of family. This we pray together for his great name's sake. Amen.