



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Gathered before God**  
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

February 22, 2009  
*Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday (Year B)*  
Psalm 50:1-6

God alone is God. That is the one overarching theological message of Psalm 50—that God alone is God, and God alone is worthy of our praise and worship. On this Transfiguration Sunday—when the splendor of God is revealed on the mountaintop in such bold and unmistakable ways—I want us to consider for a moment what our worship of this God should be like. I am convinced that so much of what we are looking for in worship is misplaced at best—or downright heresy at worst.

A friend of mine introduced me to a poem by Billy Collins called “Introduction to Poetry” in which he laments the way most of us read poems. (Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry” in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2002), 16. I am thankful to my wonderful friend Carol Tate for introducing me to the writing of Billy Collins.)

I’m convinced that we do the same thing to our understanding of worship as Collins say others do to poems. Here’s how Collins describes it:

*I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem’s room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.  
I want them to water-ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author’s name on the shore.  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.*

So today, instead of tying our worship to a chair in order to beat some meaning out of it, I want to hold it up to the light like a color slide, or better still, I want us to walk into our worship and feel the walls for a light switch.

We worship because we hunger for God. Whether we are aware enough to figure it out or not, we gather each week not because worshiping God is simply a good thing to do,

but rather because it is something we have to do to be human. The most profound statement that can be made about us is that we need to join with others in bowing before God in worshipful acts of devotion, praise, obedience, and thanksgiving. As one worship book says it, “All of us know somewhere in our hearts that we are not whole without worship, and we hunger to engage in that practice. Thus, planners of worship do not *make* worship meaningful; worship is *already* meaningful.

As many of you know, I like to spend a good deal of time in a coffee shop, because I can do one of three things there, depending on what that particular day is like. I can meet a couple of members from the church for caffeinated pastoral care. Or I can read. Or, on days when I am too mentally exhausted for those pursuits that require my mind, I can sit for a few moments to hear what’s going on in the lives of those around me. I chalk it up to sermon preparation—either listening for some story or image that would be appropriate for a sermon, or, in the case of younger folks, listening for fresh uses of our language. It’s fun to hear how people put words together, such as the day two high school girls called one of their male classmates by a slang term for fool, prompting their admission that he was not a *perpetual* fool, but only a *situational* fool.

Sometime before Christmas I was sitting in the Greenberry’s Coffee Shop, drinking a cup of coffee and doing some reading, when I found myself sucked into a conversation taking place at the table beside me that reminded me of how we are not whole without worship.

It was a group of three young people—most likely college students—who were talking about the meaning of life. What caught my attention was the despair that had already crept into their descriptions of their lives. They seemed genuinely happy—after all they were young people drinking lattes—but their faces and their voices betrayed a deeper hunger that wasn’t being met.

Suddenly, the conversation turned to the church. I was hoping to hear something inspiring in their voices, but this is what I heard: “The church is so fake. Everybody’s always acting happy, saying ‘I love life. I love people. I love Jesus.’”

This prompted one of the group to say, “I know what you mean. I mean, I love life, and I love people, but Jesus? I’m not too sure about him.”

Those young people seated by me that day aren’t the only people walking around the streets of Harrisonburg who are longing for something that will satisfy their gnawing hunger and thirst. They— and at times we—are listening for a voice that will offer something to bring hope out of despair, life out of death.

Psalm 50 invites us to listen to the voice who speaks such hope—to the voice which is crying out, “Gather to me my faithful ones.” For all of us who are hungering for an experience of God, the good news is that God’s voice summons all creation to consider that God alone is God and to gather here in the sanctuary to give ourselves away to God in worship and to let our lives be shaped by the ways of this God.

Tom Long once remarked that “every church ought to paint the words ‘come and see’ over the doorway, and give to everyone who enters (the sanctuary), for whatever reason, a joyful word of welcome and a knapsack for the journey ahead.”

He then goes on to tell a story about staying in a hotel in a large city where he

stepped out of an elevator and saw a small, handwritten notice which read, “Party tonight! Room 210. 8:00 p.m. Everyone invited!” Here’s how he tells the story: “I could hardly picture who would throw such a party, or for what reason, but I imagined that at eight o’clock, room 210 would be filled by an unlikely assortment of people—sales representatives seeking a little relief from the tedium of the road; a vacationing couple tired of sight-seeing; a man stopping overnight in the middle of a long journey, looking for a bit of festivity; a few inquisitive and wary hotel employees, there because of professional responsibility; perhaps some young people who had slipped out of their parents’ rooms, anxiously curious about what was happening in room 210.”

“Alas, the sign by the elevator soon came down, replaced by a typewritten statement from the motel staff explaining that the original notice was a hoax, a practical joke. That made sense, of course, but in a way it was too bad. For a brief moment, those of us staying at the hotel were tantalized by the possibility that there just might be a party going on somewhere to which we were all invited—a party where it didn’t make much difference who we were when we walked in the door, or what motivated us to come; a party we could come to out of boredom, loneliness, curiosity, responsibility, eagerness to be in fellowship, or simply out of a desire to come and see what was happening; a party where it didn’t matter nearly as much what got us in the door, as what would happen to us after we arrived. Perhaps if there is to be such a party, the church is going to have to throw it” (Tom Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, pages 68-69).

And we do. Sunday after Sunday, the church gathers around table, font, and pulpit to throw just such a party. And thank goodness, we aren’t the ones who draw up the guest list. Remember, God alone is God, and God’s voice summons the faithful to gather so that we can lose ourselves in wonder, love and praise.

But this is precisely where our worship often strays off track. Far too often, we tie worship to a chair and insist that it have meaning, which is another way of saying that it must somehow do what I want it to do, which is about as far from an authentic understanding of worship as we can get.

Several years ago the church where I was a pastor in Nashville joined with a sister congregation to put on the musical *Godspell*. Usually, there are more musically-inclined actor-wannabes in Music City than you can shake a stick at, but they never seemed to be around when you needed them. When our music director came to me and asked, “Would you mind joining the cast,” I should have gone with my instincts. But for whatever reason, I agreed.

At first, things went well. I enjoyed learning the music, working on my dance moves (although the fire marshal almost shut us down—it seems I was burning up the floor). But slowly, the novelty wore off. Any initial excitement was transformed into a seething disgust. It wasn’t just that the folks from the sister congregation grated on my nerves (which they did). It was something else. I couldn’t stand being the only one at rehearsals who had any clue about what we were doing on stage. No one could remember their lines; they would stand in the wrong places; some would sing the wrong song; the band couldn’t play a couple of the pieces; and, what’s worse, no one seemed to care. Now I know this wasn’t Broadway, but come on. After all, I knew all of my lines and where I

was supposed to be at any given moment in the play. Not only that, I knew the other characters' lines too, and believe me when I tell you that I could have told them where to go. It finally got to the point that I was praying for the rapture (which is a word I had learned from the sister church) so that I would be spared the embarrassment of our performance.

Unfortunately, opening night arrived before Jesus, so the show had to go on. Believe it or not, things went amazingly well. Most of the cast found their marks; the songs were great; and there weren't even too many dropped lines. It was another magical night in the theater which the audience simply cherished.

I was exceedingly pleased that someone had thought to videotape our performance, and even more thrilled when it was suggested that we watch it together at the cast party a few nights later. I remember thinking those smug, self-indulgent thoughts to which all actors are prone. I simply couldn't wait to see how my diligence in learning all of the right things would translate onto the small screen.

As it turns out, I could have waited forever. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. If it's true that a haughty spirit goes before a fall, I must have been the haughtiest person alive, for great was my fall that night. I watched in horror as I moved clumsily from mark to mark, flatly intoning my lines with no sense of their meaning. True, the words were all there and I was always where I was supposed to be, but I had no heart. And take it from me—an actor without heart is dead, and you can spot it from the worst seat in the balcony.

You can also spot a church with heart trouble as well, and it shows up most clearly in the sanctuary. You can see it in other places too, to be sure, but a diminished or misplaced worship is the first tell-tale sign.

If you've ever stood behind this pulpit, you know that you can see a lot of things from up here. And, while it's impossible to know what's really going on in someone's heart, I am convinced that our attitude and posture in worship reveal a great deal about whether we are here because we've been gathered by God or whether we're here to be seen or to slake our guilt or to earn some favor.

People often ask me if I'm ever distracted by what I see or hear in this place. They most often think that children bother preachers in the sanctuary. Let me tell you that I'm not ever really bothered by children in this place, because they can do so many different things at once. No, more concerning is the look on faces or in whole bodies (and you can see it) that reveals a total disinterest. I often assume it's disinterest in me or the sermon or the hymns or the prayers or those around them, but in my clearer moments I know it's a deeper concern. It's a failure of the heart.

But today, on this Transfiguration Sunday, I have some good news: God's voice continues to summon us, calling us to gather before God and to lose ourselves—to be immersed into the love of God and drawn out of our self-consumed lives so that we join with something so much bigger than ourselves.

God alone is God. And we do not worship that God so that we can get something out of it. No, we worship so that our lives may be more fully in line with the deepest desires of our hearts—which are restless until they find their rest in God—and more fully a display of the people we were created to be. May we continue to gather before that God, who alone is worthy of our praise.