

**What Shall We Worship?
Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c**

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It is here—the most holy day of the year! At least, that is the way it seems! It is Super Bowl Sunday!

Let's be honest! More than Christmas, much more than Easter, far surpassing Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, Groundhog Day, Arbor Day, Columbus Day and almost my birthday, from all appearances, today has all the makings of the holiest day of the year!

Churches will shuffle schedules. Families will alter bedtimes. Commerce will all but come to a stop. Rich and poor, young and old, black and white, lovers of country music and hip hop—all differences are transcended today. Even here in Canada we will turn our attention from the rink to the field, from Toronto to Tampa!

Oh, it may sound sacrilegious to put Super Bowl Sunday in the realm of the holy, but think about it. Many have already donned their special garbs, with the faithful wearing the appropriate colors. The holy foods have been prepared, maybe even ordered. Those who are unable to actually be at the holy of holies will crowd around TV sets in living rooms and bars and restaurants (forget Covid restrictions!) All of them suddenly transformed into satellite temples.

There has been a season of preparation stretching from the hot-end-of-summer, through the hectic days of fall, past the winter solstice. The temple in Tampa has been prepared, the grounds manicured, with security that makes the Hajj seem like a day in the park. The announcer-priest, those who will interpret for us the service, will begin their work almost before we get home. The choir (ok the band) and the soloist have been rehearsing for weeks! There will be altar boys (mainly girls) who will send those watching into an almost ecstatic frenzy even before the main event begins.

Of course, there will be those distractions—those who want to infringe on our holy events with commercial interest—but for the truly faithful, nothing will get in the way of those gods who will perform super-human feats. And when it is over words of praise and gratitude will be offered, as we begin to get ready for our next service.

It may sound sacrilegious, but it is all there. This day has the makings of the holiest day of the year. We have done it before. We will do it again. Holy! Holy! Holy!

But before we offer our first born as a sacrifice at the super bowl, let me ask a question. Can you tell me who is playing? Can you tell me who played last year?

Yet today we will be consumed with this game. We will worship at the NFL altar. We have to! We must! We must worship!

Maybe not at that altar, but there is something within us that seeks the holy. Remember, holy does not necessarily mean God. Holy means different, beyond us. From

ancient times to this day, we have found objects of holiness, objects that help us make sense of our world; objects that help us make sense of ourselves. From Stonehenge to the Super Bowl; from the Pyramids to St. Peter's to Port Williams United Baptist Church we all find something, someone to worship.

We all worship. And it happens in unusual places! I have recently learned about Atheist Church! Now I will admit that it sounds like an oxymoron—atheist church? Doesn't church assume something about god? But it is a thing! It seems it began in London and has spread across the world. There is a site in Houston, Texas in the heart of the Bible Belt! It is called Oasis. In their description they say, *Oasis is a secular community that meets weekly on Sunday mornings to enjoy fascinating talks, live music, and conversation.*

These five core values define the Oasis community:

- *People are more important than beliefs*
- *Reality is known through reason*
- *Meaning comes from making a difference*
- *Human hands solve human problems*
- *Be accepting and be accepted¹*

Doesn't that sound like church? Like worship?

They are not the only new formation. Just this week I learned about *The Church at Grovers Corner*.² If the location sounds familiar it is the town featured in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Beginning in February 2018, this "church" gathers every other month in Louisville, KY to read the play out loud. That is their only text and their sole reason for existing. But one of the founders says that after about the eighth meeting *"We had a bunch of sort of godless theatre heathens backstage, who had a conversation. 'You know, this is the church that I would go to.'*³

All of us worship. Scientists are now telling us that we seem to be hardwired to worship. There is a part in the brain that lights up that stimulates endorphins whenever we enter into worship. The same part of the brain lights up in Buddhist priests and Catholic nuns when they are praying. The same parts light up when we are worshipping too. Those parts of our brain are affected when we worship. And we all worship. It might not be the Biblical God, but we worship—our job, wealth, power, fame, popularity, family, church. What is it that you worship?

It might be the prowess of a football team, a wonderful play, the glory of nature, wealth, good food, a good time but we all worship. We have an innate need to worship, to give ourselves to something beyond ourselves. Blaise Pascal said *"There is a God-shaped*

¹ <https://www.houstonoasis.org/>

² https://www.americantheatre.org/2021/02/04/realizing-life-while-they-ritualize-it/?fbclid=IwAR0ajiCMmPbA-Zac87GsSF9p1qHVLZgg95yCQEtV_nd1a7UbcN63GtvCb34

³ Ibid.

vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”⁴

But that is Pascal’s confessional statement. What is yours? What is it that seeks to fill that hole in your heart? Even more, how do you seek to fill it?

The psalmist says that the only way is through the worship of God. He writes: *It’s a good thing to sing praise to our God; praise is beautiful, praise is fitting. God’s the one who rebuilds Jerusalem, who regathers Israel’s scattered exiles. He heals the heartbroken and bandages their wounds. He counts the stars and assigns each a name. Our Lord is great, with limitless strength; we’ll never comprehend what he knows and does. God puts the fallen on their feet again and pushes the wicked into the ditch. Sing to God a thanksgiving hymn.*⁵

We worship when we praise God. Now there are two ways to do that. One is praise to to God, giving thanks for the gifts we are given, for the ways in which we see God at work in the world. The second way is praise about God. It is testimony.⁶ It is what we say; even more it is what we do!

Worship is not just what happens here on Sunday mornings. It happens when join together to explore the scriptures, actually reading them and seeking to understand what they meant then, but even more what they mean for us now.

Worship happens when we join together to walk on the Coldest Night of the Year, reminding ourselves that God “gathers the outcasts, heals the brokenhearted, binds up their wounds, and lifts the downtrodden.” We remember and join God in that enterprise.

That is just as much a part of worship as the doxology, the prayers, the scripture. I heard an African-American preacher one time say that if you come to worship and hear a great choir, hear a great sermon, get slain by the spirit, jump up and down and shout hallelujahs till your voice is gone, and then leave and don’t change the world, you have done nothing more than waste a good morning!

Tony Campolo tells the story of a young woman named Nancy who, even though she is confined to a wheelchair, worships everyday. She has an extraordinary ministry. Every week, in the personals section of her local newspaper, she runs an ad that reads, “If you are lonely or have a problem, call me. I am in a wheelchair and I seldom get out. We can share our problems with each other. I’d love to talk.” She spends much of her day on the telephone talking with the more than 30 lonely and discouraged people who call each week.

Campolo asked how she came to be confined to a wheelchair, Nancy revealed that she had tried to commit suicide by jumping from the balcony of her apartment. Instead of dying, however, she ended up in a hospital room paralyzed from the waist down. One night in the hospital, she said, Jesus came to her and very clearly said, “You have had a healthy body and a crippled soul. From this day on you will have a crippled body, but you will have a

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/801132-there-is-a-god-shaped-vacuum-in-the-heart-of-each>

⁵ Psalm 147:1-7a. *The Message*

⁶ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-psalm-147-11-20>

healthy soul." She said, "I gave my life to Jesus that night in that hospital room, and I knew that if I kept a healthy soul, it would mean that I would have to help other people. And so I do."

That is true worship.

In writing about worship Frederick Buechner says, *Phrases like Worship Service or Service of Worship are tautologies. To worship God means to serve him. Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done—run errands for him, carry messages for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do—sing songs for him, create beautiful things for him, give things up for him, tell him what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.*

A Quaker Meeting, a Pontifical High Mass, the Family Service at First Presbyterian, a Holy Roller Happening—unless there is an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful.

This evening there is going to be a worship service. Oh, we won't call it that but grown men and women will don garnish costumes, gather in socially undistanced crowds, risking life and health, share special foods, shout and scream and generally make a fool out of themselves. And for the next days, and maybe even weeks they will relive the event, sharing their celebration. All over a game.

What about us?

What do we worship today?

How will our worship affect our lives, our world?

This morning we come to celebrate communion, the Eucharist, The Lord's Supper. It is known by many names, but this meal invites us all to participate wherever we are—in this sanctuary, in Lockwood Hall, in our homes. You don't have to be a member of this congregation, you just have to be the Lord's, and who does he exclude.

If you are here I hope you picked up the elements as you came into worship. If you are at home I hope you have some bread and juice of whatever form that may be—toast and coffee, cookies and juice, bread and water. It doesn't matter what. It is what we remember; it is how we approach this time.

There needs to be a sense of joy and foolishness in our worship Buechner says. Perhaps there is no better example of that than this meal that we share this morning. We call it a meal, but it is hardly enough to be called a snack. Yet it does nourish our souls.

It is a a celebration, yet it recalls an execution, not something we normally celebrate. Yet it reminds us of eternity.

It is a story of death, yet it is a reminder of where we find true life, the eternal in the midst of now.

We gather to remember the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples, on that Passover, when they were remembering God's deliverance from bondage. Jesus took the common elements of bread and wine and transformed them. He said this my body, this is my blood given for you to show you the way to true life. Remember this, do this and live.