

Spiritual Formation in Worship, Part 1: Practicing the Presence

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Introduction: How close is God?

Popular perspective:

- "And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance." -- from song by Bette Midler

Biblical perspective:

- Scripture acknowledges God's "otherness," set apart from Creation and ruling from Heaven (i.e., Ps. 11:4), but moves deeper to reveal a personal God, a **God who draws near**.
- Note how God draws near in the following examples – jot down key ideas:
 - in salvation history: Gen. 17:1-8 _____
 - in the Incarnation: John 1:14 _____
 - in people: Matt. 28:20 _____
John 14:19-20 _____
John 15:5 _____
John 16:5-7 _____
Gal. 4:6 _____
 - in worship: Matt. 18:20 _____

Exploration

So what? *What are the implications of the Spirit indwelling us?* Note key ideas and phrases:

- Eph. 1:17-19 _____

- Eph. 3:16 _____

- 2 Cor. 3:17-18 _____

- 1 Cor. 4:20 _____

- 2 Tim. 1:12 _____

Discussion

So how? *When it comes to Lutheran worship, how can we discern the Spirit more deeply, experience a closer relationship with Christ, and be increasingly "conformed" to him?*

Consider this quote by author Leanne Payne:

Some folk, thinking they are being honest, suffer from the notion that to practice the Presence is an exercise not in faith, but in mere credulity. But to acknowledge the Presence of *the God who is really there* is actually a form of prayer, a way of praying always as the Scriptures exhort us to do. When we do this, the eyes and ears of our hearts are opened to receive the word He is always speaking. We enter into a path of obedience perhaps unknown to us before where we joyfully acknowledge, 'Jesus is Lord.'

But the acknowledgment that God is always with us - even when in our sensory being we are least aware of it - is not always easy. It requires discipline. - Leanne Payne, *The Healing Presence*

What is the difference between "faith" and "mere credulity" (hint: Jas 2:19)? Some might say that it is impossible for us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), but what would happen if we practiced the presence of Christ in worship by *praying* each element of worship—that is, being open to God, listening for the Spirit, being wholly present in each worship part and offering up ourselves moment by moment? Could that make Paul's words in Romans 12:1 —

presenting ourselves as living sacrifices as our act of worship —come to life? How would that affect our relationship with Christ? How will that form us (refer again to Payne's quote)?

*** Ah-OO-ga – Misconception Alert Number One! ***

Practicing the Presence of Christ in worship does not mean that *we* make God present by our words or actions. God initiates worship; we respond to his call (John 4:23). A concrete example of call/response is Ex. 24:1-3). Also, we don't "practice" as in rehearse or drill, to someday 'get it right' so God will show up. We "practice" as in "apply," or "realize" that which we know intellectually to be true (Matt 18:20). Practicing the Presence is another way to "fix our eyes upon Jesus" (2 Cor. 4:18, Col.3:2).

*** Ah-OO-ga – Misconception Alert Number Two! ***

Practicing the Presence does not mean that we will always *feel* the presence of Christ or experience a certain emotion.

Theologian Robert Warren puts it well:

God is already and always present in his world. Our discipline of practicing his presence is simply our tuning in to that Presence. It is living in the truth that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

There is a difference between the practice of the presence and the sense of the presence of God. The *practice* is our part, part of our spiritual discipline; the *sense* of God's presence is his gift to give when and how he chooses. We will not always *sense* God's presence. – Robert Warren, *The Practice of Prayer*

What does this quote imply about *emotions* in worship?

Application: *So when? When might we practice the presence of Christ in worship?*

Where in your congregational worship is there space and opportunity for practicing the presence of Christ? Think holistically - all the individual parts of worship!

- Praise (praising God for *who* He is)
- Thanksgiving (thanking God for *what* He has done)
- Repentance
- Petition
- Word (scripture)
- Sacrament

Provocative Questions to Ponder:

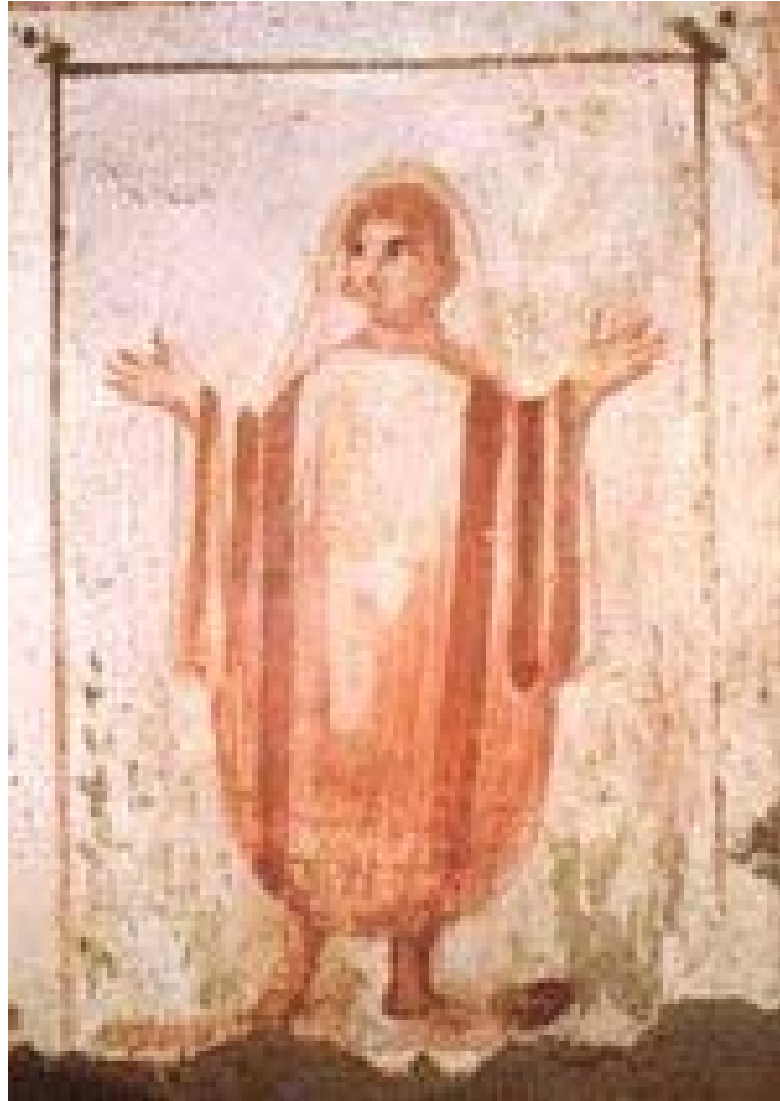
1. Is there space - generous space in *time* and *focus* - given in corporate worship to accomplish all the above worship elements? What obstacles or distractions hinder you from being fully present before God in each of these elements? What do you plan to do about it?
2. Does your congregation take seriously that visitors might actually want to help "get God worshiped"? To what extent does "whole-hearted" or "half-there" participation by congregants invite or discourage a visitor from entering into worship?
3. Can we be formed spiritually when we are unmindful of or indifferent to the Spirit in worship? Does it matter?

Summary: How close is God? The great Christian paradox: the God who is above and beyond all is the God who comes to indwell us and our worship when we come to faith. Salvation is "God for us" and spiritual formation develops from "God in us." God actually can be closer to us now than if Christ had hung around physically on Earth instead of ascending into heaven (John 16:5-7).

What are the implications of the presence of the Spirit in us? The Spirit not only seals us as adopted children and guarantees eternal life, but invites us to know Christ better and better and be formed spiritually here and now, so that we begin to "grow up into Christ" (Eph. 4:15), increasing in hope, unlocking the riches of life with Christ, and accessing the Spirit's power in our lives - in short, increasing in spiritual maturity and love (the definition of "spiritual formation"). With the Spirit's leading and nurture, those who trust and love Jesus seek to be formed in Christ Jesus (Gal. 4:19).

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Below: fourth century catacomb painting of an *orant*, a (female) Christian in prayer. This was the early Christian posture for prayer - palms and eyes open and lifted heavenward in a gesture of receiving (see John 11:41, 1 Timothy 2:8). How does our body posture reflect our "soul posture" - our mind, heart and will in prayer? What ways can we physically reflect "practicing the presence" of Christ?



Psalm 123:1-2 — I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven.
As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master,
As the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the LORD our God, Till he shows us his mercy.

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