



First United Church of Oak Park

Hopes and Dreams

Exodus 34:29-35

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What do you expect or hope for when you come to worship? When I posed this question to a couple of dozen worshipers several years ago, I got a range of responses:¹

Some worshipers valued the honesty of the moment, saying things like this:

- I pretty much go in empty-handed.
- You need to be you.
- You can struggle with who you are and trying to deal with the present-day world and how difficult it sometimes is.

Others sought a bit of a retreat:

- I can forget about what's happening outside and concentrate on my relationship with God.
- I need to come to worship to get away from the everyday world.
- I know it's a place I can go where no one will condemn me
- There's a sense of comfort for me.

For many worshipers, church was an opportunity to recharge their batteries:

- Worship "gives a jump-start to the week."
- Helps me renew my energy in all the projects I'm doing.

People looked for help, too:

- Good worship "zeroes in on everyday life."
- Most people are coming for some help, and being able to deal with their personal life and give them strength to get through.

Worship held an ethical value for some people:

- It counters the "me" orientation.
- I hope I can come away with ideas on how to be a better Christian

But, worship was best if it was not too much of an ethical how-to:

- I don't want to know how I'm supposed to do anything. . . . Let me make up my own mind.

People came for fellowship and some sought an emotional experience, too.

¹These comments about worship are quotes from worshipers I interviewed in the process of researching my PhD dissertation, about which I am happy to talk with you at great length, should you be interested. Data shared with permission.

Though their responses were somewhat different, all these worshipers had one thing in common: they testified that first and foremost that what they wanted from worship was to be able to connect with God.

- Connectedness to God is what I'm looking for.
- That God and I will touch each other at some point, that I will feel the presence of God and He will know I'm there.
- God is the reason I'm here, and I realize that he is my strength.

What brings you to church? What do you expect when you enter this worship space on Sunday morning? For what do you hope as you open that bulletin? The conclusion I draw from my experiences as a pastor, a worshiper, and a researcher, is that what we bring to worship is as multi-faceted as an expertly cut gemstone. But I think that at the heart of those many facets is a desire that we share as human beings, a desire to connect to the divine – that which is bigger than ourselves, that which is truer than ourselves, that profound mystery which we glimpse but never fully comprehend.

I am the first person to admit that we do not always encounter the divine in worship. As one of my respondents said emphatically, sometimes we leave a worship service thinking to ourselves, "Well, that was a waste."

I'm also quite ready to admit that the church has no monopoly on the divine. One of our council members offered a lovely devotional last week about encountering God in the beauty and complexity of nature. Others here regularly testify to the profound experience of meeting Jesus in the faces of the suffering and those who serve them. Some of my own most profound spiritual growth has come in the context of parenting, when I've had to be honest with myself about my weaknesses and how much help I really need, just to get through a tough day or a tough season. In Psalm 139 the psalmist asserts that God is everywhere:

*Where could I go to get away from your spirit?
Where could I go to escape your presence?
If I went up to heaven, you would be there.
If I went down to the grave, you would be there, too.
If I could fly on the wings of the dawn,
stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean,
even there your hand would guide me,
even there your strong hand would hold me tight.*

I think we come to church hoping to get close to this God, the one who holds us tight. We come hoping for a connection. We also come hoping to learn, so that we might be able to recognize God's presence more quickly outside of church, in the far corners and difficult moments of our lives. There is a yearning that is at the heart of our worship and our life together. A true and deep yearning.

It is my own yearning to which I connect when I read this mysterious text in Exodus. Moses' face shines because he has a rich and intimate relationship with God. It's also plenty complicated – full of complaints and disagreements and demands. Yet it's transformative for Moses.

There are a couple of things I want to note about this text.

First, Moses is just an ordinary guy, and that doesn't change in these narratives. He makes mistakes; he gets irritated by the people he works with; he loses his temper. Often. He's normal, just like you and me. That doesn't change. What does change for Moses is that he becomes more open to God, and with each episode in

the desert, Moses discovers more dimensions of God's steadfast love, God's patience, God's goodness, God's abundance. Despite his many disappointments, God's presence sustains him. That's the first thing I want to note: Moses' intimacy with God does not change how normal Moses is, but it does change how easy it is for him to live with himself and his challenges.

The second thing I want to note is that this is a second chance text. It comes right on the heels of the people building a golden calf and worshiping it instead of God. It's a huge eruption of disobedience in the desert, and it's almost the last straw for God, but God sucks it up and, in our text, God is in the process of renewing the covenant with the people. The God we worship is a second-chance God. As the scriptures put it, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The table around which we are going to gather in a few minutes is a reminder of that. The bread we break and the cup we share are reminders of God's commitment in Jesus to forgive and restore. Here, as we eat and drink and reform ourselves as a community of faith, we proclaim God's forgiving and renewing grace. In the everydayness of this meal, we recall that God is with us in the everyday, giving us yet another chance to follow Jesus faithfully. That's the second thing I want to note: the God we worship is a God of forgiveness and grace.

God invites us all into faithful relationship. Our text today focuses on Moses, but what God longs for in the desert and throughout the biblical narrative, OT and NT alike, is the faithfulness of the whole people of God, and that's still what God longs for: your faithfulness, my faithfulness, the faithfulness of the church.

With Christians around the world, on Wednesday we will begin to observe the season of Lent, a six-week period in the church year that leads us up to Easter. This year during Lent, we invite you consider how you might deepen your relationship with God. Our theme, which we've borrowed from the United Church of Christ, is "Take Nothing with You."

This theme reminds us of how different we are from the Israelites in the desert, and how similar we are in other ways. They had to leave almost everything behind in order to follow God into the wilderness; they brought very little with them in the way of stuff. On the other hand, they had plenty of memories and expectations that they dragged along, and they never let Moses forget it. Their emotional and cultural baggage weighed heavily on their journey. It got in the way of their encountering and experiencing God.

We're not the Israelites of 3-4000 years ago, but we share with them the reality of being encumbered. We have our own sorts of baggage that we drag along on our spiritual journeys. Perhaps it's emotional baggage: suitcases full of old grudges or sadness or frustration. Perhaps it is situational baggage: anxiety about work or family or how we will pay the next mortgage payment or the pressure we feel to keep up appearances. Perhaps it is the actual stuff we drag along with us: the phones that occupy every spare minute we find, or the closets stuffed with clothing, or rooms full of things we thought we really needed but quickly discovered we didn't. Perhaps it is the baggage of our calendar; we are just so busy and obligated to so many people and institutions.

What weighs you down, when it comes to seeking God in your life? What impedes your ability to perceive God, to listen, to open yourself to divine presence? Of what might you need to let go?

During the next six weeks, we will explore these questions together, as we journey toward Easter. I, for one, welcome this chance to consider my life and my spirituality. I hope that each of you will also find this a welcome opportunity as well, however you wish to engage it.

I conclude with the ancient blessing of God's presence, spoken to the people in the wilderness those many years ago:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God's countenance rest upon you and grant you peace.

Now and forevermore.

Amen.