

# **“WHAT HAPPENS IN WORSHIP”**

**Isaiah 6:1-8**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

**The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet**

**May 27, 2018 - Trinity Sunday**

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Apropos of my sermon title, I want to recount for you something that happened here in worship last Sunday and its aftermath. We were delighted to welcome Don and Bess Jafvert back to Market Square for the first time in forty-one years. Don was our pastor at Market Square from 1970 to 1977.

Don and Bess had decided to take a trip from their home in West Lafayette, Indiana, to Berlin, Ohio, where, Don said, “there is a gigantic hardware-lumber store and a number of quilt shops, satisfying both of our hobbies.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the trip, Bess kept hinting to Don that maybe they ought to continue on to Harrisburg and Market Square because, at age 88, if not now, when?

Though Don was instrumental in helping to establish the Korean language ministry at Market Square and the very first stages of what was then called the Indo-Chinese Service Center and now the International Service Center, it was not an altogether happy time for him when he was here. Don had had a great passion for peace and justice ministries during the height of the Vietnam War, the War on Poverty, and other compelling issues of the time and he sometimes found himself a bit out-of-step with a congregation that was coming off a decade of the self-described “conservative and evangelical ministry” of John Tate. Don also advocated the sale of the Market Square radio station because it had become a drain on the church’s budget, but not everyone wanted to let it go. It was a prescient vision, however, and when it finally happened some years later, it provided a significant sum of money to endow the church that is so important for our ministry today.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence

Don had begun to steer this great ship of a church in a different direction he believed to be commensurate with the gospel call of the time. As with great vessels on the high seas, it was not an easy thing to do. But he persisted at considerable cost to himself and Bess until finally the strain of it led him to resign in 1977. That was the last that Market Square and the Jafverts saw of each other until last Sunday and there was a little uneasiness for them about their return.

So, what happened in worship last week? I want Don himself to tell you in words he wrote to me in a note this week: *“Though my memory is not what it used to be, Bess and I will carry our experience of last Sunday to our graves. You never will know the feeling of being welcomed to a place where I was certain I would better be forgotten....Never in my wildest dream would I have thought we would be so warmly welcomed. I begin to tell the story to our kids and become so clouded up with tears, Bess has to finish.”*

Don went on to tell me that so many things happening today at Market Square make him, in his words, *“feel now that the journey of my pastorate in former years was worthwhile.”* Those of you who were here last week to hear Don give the benediction - and those who were not can see and hear it on our Facebook site - you heard him say, *“It’s hard for me not to cry because now you are the church. Thank God for Market Square!”* He concluded his note to me by writing, *“I give the ‘new’ Market Square my deepest thanks.”*

Part of what happens in worship includes reconciliation, rejuvenation, and sometimes even resurrection from places that were dead or dying in our lives. Part of what happens in worship is coming to see life and our lives in a longer-term perspective. Don’s ministry wasn’t finished when he left here in 1977 though he may have thought it so. Last Sunday I called Don “the father of the modern Market Square movement” because the seeds he sowed did not fall on rocky ground or thorny ground or into choking weeds.

They fell on good soil<sup>2</sup> and over time they bore the fruit of what this church has become...a congregation whose mission statement is as much an emblem of the gospel as I’ve ever seen in a church coupled with a congregation who lives it out, a congregation that has become a beacon of hope not only on the Square but throughout the city. Ask the dozens of people who ring our doorbell every day seeking assistance; ask the people in Allison Hill who use the medical clinic we support at Christ Lutheran Church; ask the one thousand people with low incomes who came to our church this winter to have their tax returns prepared at no cost to them; ask the people from our neighborhood who are served breakfast every Sunday morning

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:1-20

in our Fellowship Hall; ask the people who pretty much had given up on church until they found grace and welcome here. And Market Square is a beacon of hope even in places as far away as Palestine.

Not only seeing life in long-range terms but being prepared for it in all of its disparate and sometimes desperate seasons and situations is another marker of what happens in worship. One of our members whose family recently has been rocked by very unwanted news wrote to me that “hearing the sermons from our pulpit through the years and the prayers that have been prayed has prepared us to face our current difficult days.”<sup>3</sup>

Worship is not about instant gratification, performance, or entertainment. Certainly there are days when we especially are moved or helped by something we heard or did in worship. But we cannot walk out of here today or any Sunday and judge the quality or effectiveness of that day’s worship because every Sunday is one step in a lifelong journey of being formed and shaped by the inexpressible gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ and we need every step. Worship accumulated over months, years, and decades enables us to face the realities of the world and our own lives - come what may - with equanimity, courage, and even confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

What happens in worship is that through the procession of years we come to see how large-hearted our Lord is, how inclusive of the whole human family, and how God is concerned not only for our own well-being but for the well-being of all people and the whole creation including the earth our home. We learn in worship that faith is not private or parochial but is as wide and deep as the whole world and as particular as each one of God’s children. What happens in worship is we find we are called into the mix of the world as disciples of the Lord who carry with us God’s ways wherever we go.

That is why I love today’s scripture reading from Isaiah.<sup>4</sup> Isaiah is caught up *in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day* - he is in worship - and receives a vision of being in the presence of the *triune* God. The intimation of the trinity is heard in the question God poses: “*Whom shall I, God, send and who will go for us (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)?*” Isaiah is inspired in worship to respond, “*Here I am. Send me.*” What happens in worship is that we see visions born of God’s Spirit - visions of what God is doing in the world and our place in it, visions that look a lot like the Beloved Community,<sup>5</sup> visions that see the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, of

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<sup>3</sup> Personal correspondence

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 6:1-8

<sup>5</sup> A term popularized by The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

our being sent forth in God's name to serve, and so when the triune God asks, "*Who will go for us?*" we find ourselves by the power of the triune God becoming the Lord's disciples, answering, "*Here am I. Send me.*"

Speaking of the Beloved Community, we learn how to live together in blessed and holy ways from the community of the Trinity. Liturgically, Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday of the church year named for a doctrine of the church. I know doctrines are not very exciting to most of us. I know that for many in the church, doctrines have all the excitement of reading a baseball rulebook instead of actually attending a game or of reading the conductor's notes instead of hearing the symphony. But the doctrine of the Trinity is an exception. It really is a light to us.

We come to worship the Triune God every week, the one God in three "persons." Theologically, the term "person" is tricky because it doesn't refer to "person" in the way we usually think of persons, not in the sense that you and I are persons. Referring to the Trinity, "persons" are more like "manifestations." Three manifestations of one God, manifestations we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To call the manifestations "Creator," "Redeemer," and "Sustainer" as sometimes is done to avoid what appears to be non-inclusive language is not adequate because those are words describing function whereas the traditional formula is ontological, referring to "being" or "essence." God's essence is to be triune, three manifestations of the singular God.

The problem with functional designations for the Trinity is that there are no precise distinctions between the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not the case, as one writer has put it, where the Father starts the game by creating the world, the Son comes in at the start of the second half to save it, and then the Holy Spirit enters toward the end of the fourth quarter to kick the winning field goal.<sup>6</sup> When creation occurs, all three manifestations of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God - are in on it. Same with the work of salvation and the work of conveying the power and presence of God to us.

The Trinity is a community of utter oneness and love and thus is the template for the way we are commissioned to live and relate in the world on the way to establishing the Beloved Community on earth.

Dottie Hotchkiss, who volunteers in the church office on Wednesdays, asked me this week when she saw the sermon title if the same rule applies to worship as applies to Las Vegas. Does what happens in worship stay in worship? We both immediately agreed that it does not, that what happens in worship decidedly is not meant to stay in worship but is to be carried

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, [Hunting the Divine Fox](#).

with us wherever we go. When the Triune God asks, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us into the world doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly?*”<sup>7</sup> worship trains us to respond, “*Here I am. Send me.*”<sup>8</sup>

What happens in worship is that we are undergirded and supported in our “long obedience in the same direction”<sup>9</sup> so that the gospel of Jesus Christ forms and fashions our lives and makes of us all a community of the Lord’s joy. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 6:8

<sup>9</sup> A phrase found in [Beyond Good and Evil](#) by Friedrich Nietzsche.