



Caught

Psalm 24

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What brought you here today? Somewhere on that list, I hope, is worship. That's what we're up to right now. We're in the middle of something called *liturgy*: Greek for "public work," but used in the New Testament to describe public worship. We are gathered in public to do something with God for ourselves and for the rest of humanity.

Worship isn't an easy thing to describe, define, or even talk about. That's a bit odd, isn't it? After all, you'd think that something so critical to our understanding of and relationship with God would be relatively cut and dried – even if it wasn't easy to understand or do.

Those of us who grew up in some sort of community of faith have some insight: we know how worship was done "back then." And were we all "cradle Presbyterians" – that is, if we'd all grown up around the thought and practice of our branch of Presbyterian Christianity, we'd share enough experience and common terminology, perhaps, to start a conversation about what worship really is – or ought to be.

But so many of us here in this room, in the midst of our service of worship today, came from some other background, that it's important to remember that not all of us share a common starting point even about how God operates in time and space. What's obvious to one person, is completely foreign to another; the indelible memories of one, never experienced by many. Valerie and I watched a TV program a week or so ago on a terrible natural disaster that neither of us remembered hearing about, wondering how we'd missed it, until we did the math and realized it happened while both of us were deployed overseas. We didn't hear about it then, and the tragedy had dropped off the news by the time we returned. So, we don't remember it – but you do.

I was part of a student and faculty conference in college that was held up in the Adirondack woods – less than ten miles from my home, in fact. Most of those were from New York City, so they were enthralled when they glimpsed their first white-tailed deer out the bus window.

“What’s that?” someone asked. “A deer,” I replied. There was a pause. “Nah, it’s a goat!” Well, having never seen either in person, and deer sounding incredibly exotic, it was easier to make a more commonplace assumption. My friend from the city and I did not share a common experience of animals! Of course, at that point, I’d only seen one cockroach in my life – in New York City.

So we don’t always bring shared experience to our worship here at Valley. And from time to time, it shows.

Take music, for example. Here’s a quote some of you may well resonate with: “We never sing the good old hymns anymore. What we have now is unsingable, no one understands the words, and the ministers pick them to fit their ideas without concern for us lay folks who just want to do the ones we’ve always done.” Sound good? What’s fun about this quote is that it was written in the fourth century. Any music is new that we don’t already know, right?

Something like this took place last week here in worship: the first hymn was, as the result of the misreading of my handwriting, a typo, not what I’d expected. It was a musical setting of a Psalm. I made sort of a joke of it, but what’s interesting is that a number of you later told me that you didn’t like it, some were intrigued, and others loved it – in about equal numbers!

But did you know that Presbyterians didn’t sing hymns for a long, long time? They sang psalms, just like we did. And not just Presbyterians: Martin Luther’s great hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” is really a setting of Psalm 46, a part of which we used in our call to worship this morning.

And some have asked about praise music. What was fascinating to Valerie and me about our military chapel experience was how contradictory it could be: if the song was more than two years old, it was out of date for one group; and in another place, the traditional service started growing with young people who’d grown up in big, evangelical churches with praise bands, and who found themselves attracted to traditional hymns and choirs. And the world keeps on turning!

But it’s not just music; it’s the words, what’s said and how, and the way the service is ordered that’s important, too. I’ve been in worship in churches and groups of thousands, and on hilltops and in deserts with one or two other people, even in languages I didn’t understand, and it’s met those inner criteria that say to me: “yes, this is really worshipping our glorious God.” And because of that, thought that I could feel like I was worshipping in just about any context. Not true! I have come out of services wondering what just happened, with a strong sense that something was missing.

Now, I believe that there is such a thing as right worship. But it seems to me that the God, who created each of us as an individual, with a unique personality and a unique relationship to God, accepts a lot of things that you and I would find uncomfortable – well, at least me.

Most of you are here this morning because the worship we offer feels at least more or less right to you, and that's as it should be. We work hard to design and lead worship that we believe is pleasing to God and uplifting to you.

But in the end, worship is not about the experience around us; it's about God, and giving back to God some of what God's given us.

Psalm 26 is a prayer or a song that was a part of worship in Jerusalem thousands of years ago. Like so many things that are so old, it may feel a bit funny, even though translators have done their best to put into words that are accessible to us. It is the prayer of a worshipper approaching God, realizing just what it means to approach God.

A worshipper approaching God. How do you do that? Well, in a sense, we can't, since God is all around us all the time. It's more a matter of paying attention to God's presence. Many of us feel a bit uneasy in the presence of a mere human celebrity, let alone the creator of the universe! This beautiful sanctuary makes God's presence seem comfortable: the air conditioning, the relatively comfortable pews, the gentle, sonorous words, the magnificent music, the fellowship, and – oh, of course, the view!

But it's never truly easy. Contact between God and creation is never simple, any more than it's easy for us to relate to an ant. God dwells in a different reality from you and me; the difference in the level of power, of knowledge, of ability to just do things, is so great.

So the psalmist – and the worshipper repeating the psalmist's words – has to remind him or herself of whatever scrap of worthiness there is in them that can be brought to the moment of encounter. It's as if he's saying, "It's okay, I can do this, I'm trying to be a good person, I'm trying to follow the rules..." What's said may seem a bit boastful, maybe assuming too much, but you and I are thinking the same thing in a different way: not one of us is here because we deserve to be on our own merits, because we've been such great people that we can demand an audience with God.

No. And this is what I want you to consider today: it is Jesus Christ who makes it possible for us to be here in this magnificent room. It is Jesus Christ that makes it possible for us to approach God, turn our minds to God, praise God, grow in our relationship to God – even talk with God, invited by Jesus himself to call him Abba, "Daddy". As Paul told the Roman church, "I beseech you, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies, a holy and acceptable sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship."

All of us, members, clergy, all of us, are guests, just guests here in this place, here on earth. So as the words and the notes and the view spread out over you, and you soak in the sense of God's presence and forgiveness and love, remember you didn't earn it, it wasn't something you bought: it has been bought for you. Give thanks and praise to God for that indescribable gift.