

Preparing For Worship

At the ceremonies for the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron. 5-7), Solomon makes it clear that no temple can contain the living God, saying, "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!" (2 Chronicles 6:18). Nonetheless, the temple is dedicated as a "resting place" (2 Chronicles 6:41) where God might tarry for awhile, thus making it possible for the people of God to commune with the Lord.

This is a wonderful picture to contemplate. Not even heaven can contain God, as if the Lord cannot help but spill out of heaven onto the earth. There is no presumption on Solomon's part that we're going to dwell with the utterly holy transcendent God. There is only the offer of hospitality to the Lord by making of a space for God to visit us.

Preparing for worship is like making space for God. When we offer hospitality to people, there is some preparation necessary on our part. We must see to it that there's food in the house, we clean the house and get a sleeping place ready. We make sure there are clean towels and perhaps snip a few flowers from the garden to place on a bedside table to say welcome.

When we prepare to go to the place of worship, we, too, need to prepare our hearts for divine visitation. We need to make space in our lives by making sure we go to worship where, with the gathered assembly of God's people, we indicate our seriousness in seeking the Lord and our commitment to following in the Way as part of the people of God called church. We also need to get ready to welcome our Guest only to have the table turned on us and realize that Christ is our host who welcomes us into the presence of God.

In earlier times, people prepared for worship with the Saturday night bath ritual – scrubbing children, curling hair, shining shoes and laying out the best, most special clothes they owned. It was as if people were preparing like we do today for a party. Some traditions still do this so that going to church is the most festive event of the week, with beautiful clothes that are semi-formal, topped with beautiful hats. Many churches have dropped these rituals – for good reasons – but are we missing out on the opportunity to prepare for the Lord? When engaged in prayerfully, preparations for worship can create a sense of anticipation for meeting the Beloved.

As you take your bath or shower before worship, think about what it means that you are baptized. What are the places in your life that still need cleaned up? Give thanks for the showers of blessing God has bestowed on us in Christ. Sing for joy unto the Lord as you shower!

As you dress, think about what it means that you are clothed in Christ and his righteousness. Revelation tells us that at the end of time the church will be arrayed like a bride decked out for her groom. Think about a special occasion in your life when you wanted the best possible presentation of yourself and what that means about how we are to present ourselves unto the Lord.

As you go to worship, think about how God is waiting for you in worship. In some places, people walk to worship, singing hymns as they go. On the ride or walk to church, families can be encouraged to sing songs of faith together. We can ask this simple question of one another: "How do you hope God will meet you in worship today?" On the way home we can ask, "Where and how did God meet you in worship or church school today?" When someone invariably says, "We didn't," others sharing simple reflections upon their experiences of worship can help them see how God is indeed present to us. Comments like "God surprised me as I looked at the bread and cup on the table during the offering and thought how lonely the elements looked there all by themselves, and then the thought came that that's how God might feel when we don't take communion each Sunday" can help shape faith eyes for future insights.

As you enter the sanctuary, present yourself unto the Lord, praying something along the lines of, "Here I am, Lord. Please come meet me here. Open me to your eternal presence."

As you participate in worship,

- it helps to understand what each part of the worship service is designed to do so that you can enter into it fully with your spirit open to the Lord.
- listen to the sermon as though it were the Lord himself speaking to you.
- bring the concerns of the world into the prayers of the people.

After the service,

- take the bulletin from worship home and put it in a prominent place so you can continue to pray the prayers during the week and intercede for those on the prayer list.
- Pray for the worship service and its leaders during the week, as well as for the church's ministries to the world.
- Read scripture daily.
- Pray as you read, watch and listen to the news. Pray for those who have been hurt, for those working on finding God's way of shalom in the midst of the situation and for the perpetrators of crimes. Bring your concerns for the world to add to the prayers of the people during intercessory prayer.

For Pastors

Help people understand the nature of what it is we're doing in worship. Put an explanation of the order of worship in the pews for people to read.

Preach a sermon that shows how Isaiah 6 or Luke 17:11-19 give us the order of worship we use each Sunday. Talk about how this four-fold worship pattern also serves as a pattern for how we're called to live with God and one another in the world entering into their presence with praise and thanksgiving, asking for forgiveness when we hurt or disappoint, listening for how we can live better together, and then serving one another in grateful praise.

Do a series of children's sermons where you take each part of worship and explain what we're doing in the service at that time.

List next Sunday's lections in the bulletin, newsletter, website so people can read and meditate on those passages for the next week. Print a daily lectionary as well.

Print this resource for use in your church, or feel free to use any suggestions offered here that are helpful in the creation of your own materials on how to prepare for worship.