

**Inspiring Worship**  
**Natural Church Development Sermon Series #06**  
**May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

**Series: Natural Church Development**  
**Scripture: Ezra 3:1-13**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on May 25<sup>th</sup>,  
2008 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

You've heard it before, and so have I. You may have even said it yourself. "The reason I go to church is to recharge my spiritual batteries." This morning, as we turn to the fifth principle of Natural Church Development, we want to take a look at worship because along with Empowering Leadership, Gift Oriented Ministry, Passionate Spirituality and Functional; Structures, Natural Church Development says that Inspiring Worship is why people come to a church as well as why people stay. Our scripture focus is in the Book of Ezra which is not a book of the Bible to which we regularly turn.

Ezra is one of the historical books of the Old Testament. It deals with that portion of history which is called the post exilic community. It comes at a time in the life of Israel when the Jewish people were in decline.

The superpower military machine in their north, Babylon, had invaded Israel and its holy city, Jerusalem. They had destroyed the temple and carried off the cream of the crop of Jewish families into captivity in a foreign land. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Ezra writes this history about 458 B.C. After 128 years of captivity, he picks up with the Jews returning to Israel and to Jerusalem.

They were a beaten people, the Jews. If anyone needed to recharge their spiritual batteries, they surely did. History had not treated them well. However, some of them were back to pick up the pieces of their lives, but it was not going well. As Eugene Peterson observers, "They were hanging on by their fingernails, and then Ezra arrived."

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Listen to what Peterson says of Ezra: “Because of Ezra,. Israel made it through . . . Their people of God identity was recovered and preserved. Ezra used Worship and Text to do it. Ezra engaged them in the worship of God, the most all absorbing, comprehensive act in which men and women can engage. This is how God formed identities become most deeply embedded in us. And Ezra led them to an obedient listening of the text of scripture. . . Ezra made his mark: Worship and Text continue to be foundational for recovering and maintaining identity as the People of God. (From The Message, p. 774)

Worship and the Word of God: since that day, some 490 years ago, when Martin Luther nailed his theses to the cathedral doors at Wittenberg and began the Reformation, these have been the foundation of what it means to be a Protestant Christian, as well.

In the third chapter of Ezra we are focused on that part of the history of the Israelites when they are rebuilding the Temple in Israel after returning from their Babylonian exile. I believe it contains three clues about the nature of worship that inspires its participants: the Focus of our Worship; Our Attitude about our Worship, and Our Engagement with our Worship. This morning I would suggest to you that Focus, Attitude, and Engagement are the three pillars of Inspiring Worship.

The focus of our worship is God. Ezra reminds us that the first thing the Israelites wanted to do was to rebuild the altar so they could make their sacrifices and connect with their God. They knew they could not rebuild the Temple overnight, but they could rebuild the altar where animals were sacrificed and burned so that their prayers could rise with the smoke into the presence of Almighty God.

Sometimes we get the focus of our worship mixed up. We think it is all about us – what can we get from it. We think about getting our spiritual batteries recharged, and we never think about the One who is to recharge them. However, worship was never meant to be about us. It was meant to be about God.

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Yet in a poll conducted in 2005, 81% of the people polled had it just the other way around. When they were asked why they went to church, 30% said they did it to be a better person and lead a moral life; 17% said they did it to find peace and happiness; 10% to connect with something larger than themselves; 8% to give structure and meaning to their lives; 3% to be part of a community; and 13% listed other.

Overwhelmingly, we Americans have our focus in the wrong place. Worship isn't meant to be about our needs. It is meant to be about giving God what God deserves as the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. It is God who is to be the focus of our worship, not our personal agendas.

Inspiring Worship also takes place when we hold the right attitude toward God: the attitude of gratitude. Once the Israelites started worshiping they couldn't stop. The prayers of the Israelites were all about thanksgiving for rescuing them from captivity and restoring them to their land. They wanted God to know that they were grateful. They dug into their pockets to rebuild the temple, and when the foundation was laid, it was a cause for deep rejoicing.

All too often we miss the opportunity to experience inspiring worship because we have the wrong attitude. Ours is one of entitlement. We seek to be blessed because we think we deserve it. We treat God like a cosmic problem solver and fail to thank God for the blessings God has bestowed on us. We fail to recognize that we are blessed to be a blessing.

Tome Tewell, the former pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in NYC, tells the story of traveling with a man in his congregation on a prison ministry. They stopped at a diner on the way home one day. The man loved sugar in his coffee, so he took not one, not two, but three teaspoonfuls of sugar. As the waitress watched, the man said, "Ma'am, we're going to need more sugar for this table." This waitress looked at him and said, "Listen, bud, before I give you more sugar, you stir what you got."

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Tewell says that waitress was like a word of God for him that day. He realized that gratitude for what he had was not a part of his life, and how in the midst of difficult and painful times in his life he had not stirred what he had in life. We all have something to be grateful for, even if it is the simple gift of life itself.

There is an old legend about three men and their sacks. Each man had two sacks, one tied in front of his neck and the other tied on his back. When the first man was asked what was in his sacks, he said, "In the sack on my back are all the good things friends and family have done. That way they're hidden from view. In the front sack are all the bad things that have happened to me. Every now and then I stop, open the front sack, take the things out, examine them, and think about them." Because he stopped so much to concentrate on all the bad stuff, he really didn't make much progress in life.

The second man was asked about his sacks. He replied, "In the front sack are all the good things I've done. I like to see them, so quite often I take them out to show them off to people. The sack in back? I keep all my mistakes in there and carry them all the time. Sure they're heavy. They slow me down, but you know, for some reason I can't put them down."

When the third man was asked about his sacks, he answered, "The sack in front is great. There I keep all the positive thoughts I have about people, all the blessings I've experienced, all the great things other people have done for me. The weight isn't a problem. The sack is like sails of a ship. It keeps me going forward.

"The sack on my back is empty. There's nothing in it. I cut a big hole in its bottom. In there I put all the bad things that I can think about myself or hear about others. They go in one end and out the other, so I'm not carrying around any extra weight at all."

Gratitude is the attitude that is to shape our worship. When you are in a room full of grateful people, it is hard not to be inspired.

Our engagement is the final aspect that makes worship inspiring. It isn't about the kind of music we sing or the kind of praying we do or the style in which the sermon is delivered. It is about our involvement with the singing, our attentiveness to the praying and our engaging the sermon with our own mind.

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When the Israelites saw that the foundation of the Temple was laid, they became engaged in their worship. Some shouted for joy. Some cried tears of gratitude. The writer says that the shouts and the tears mingled together and could be heard from far away.

In Michigan there was a man I just loved. One of my fondest memories of him was the way he would sing the hymns of worship. His family would tell you that he wasn't much of a singer. He was usually off key or flat. However, it didn't make any difference to him nor to those around him because when he sang in church he would throw his head back and bellow at the top of his lungs his praise to Almighty God. He wasn't going to let a little thing like his inability to sing stand in the way of his full engagement in worship.

Here at Northminster Presbyterian Church I believe we work hard to celebrate the scriptures of the Old and New Testament in varied forms of worship to meet the needs of different generations. I consider myself lucky because I love all forms of worship. One is not more spiritual than any other for me. However, there is one praise song that I love. Listen to these words:

My Jesus, my Savior, Lord there is none like You  
All of my days, I want to praise  
The wonders of Your mighty love  
My comfort, my shelter, tower of refuge and strength  
Let every breath, all that I am  
Never cease to worship You

Shout to the Lord all the earth let us sing  
Power and majesty praise to the King  
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar  
At the sound of Your Name  
I'll sing for joy at the work of your hands  
Forever I'll love you forever I stand  
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You

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Inspiring worship is more than just recharging your spiritual batteries. It is about what you bring to the service which has been prepared and how you respond while you are here. Those of us responsible for preparing the worship services will continue to do our best to set the table for you with a feast of music and the spoken word, but what makes the service inspiring is what you bring when you come to this service. If the focus of your worship is God; if the attitude of your worship is gratitude; and if the engagement with the worship is to offer your deep and profound joy for all you have received at God's hand, then I guarantee you the worship will be inspiring.