Newsletter Article:

**Worship**

**By Pastor Greg Mileski**

Imagine this: a divine announcement has been made; God is coming. I don’t know how God has made this known. Maybe there was a big, booming voice from the sky. Maybe the Pope has said so—he seems pretty trustworthy. Or maybe we all *just know*. But somehow, God has made it clear: if you want to be in God’s presence, be at such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time. What comes next? Would you go? Would you make sure your children were there? Would you invite your neighbors and friends, telling them what an amazing experience this is going to be? Would you look forward to it, the anticipation building with each passing day and, finally, each passing hour? After it happened, in the days following, would you keep thinking about it, wondering about what had happened and what it all meant?

Or… not?

Over the centuries, worship has been so central to the life of the Church, that we’ve come to use those two words interchangeably. But somehow, somewhere along the way, worship seems to have lost that centrality. Sometimes, it seems like worship is just another of the “services” a congregation offers. Community meal on Tuesday. Bible study on Wednesday. Worship on Sunday. Take your pick. God is everywhere, after all. Is what happens in worship really any different than what happens in our other church activities? Or, for that matter, is worship any different than a Sunday morning walk in the woods or down a fairway?

I have a confession to make: I’m not sure that God is everywhere. I mean, I suppose God *might* be everywhere—God can do what God wants, after all—but is God really on some asteroid flying through space in the same way that God is with people recovering from a disaster, or with migrant workers struggling to survive, or with parents grieving the loss of a child? I don’t think so. The problem is this: I’m not everywhere—never have been, never will be. I am always *somewhere*, in a particular time and at a particular place. I can’t go to “everywhere” to be with God; I need God to be somewhere, too.

Besides, I usually find that when we say “God is everywhere” we mean “God is anywhere (and anything) I want God to be.” And pretty soon we’re worshiping the God of our imagination, who does what we want when we want, instead of the God revealed in Scripture. That God, the one we hear about in worship, isn’t a God who is vaguely everywhere. In Scripture, God shows up in particular times and at particular places to do particular things.

But is God *uniquely* present in worship? Is God in worship in ways that God isn’t anywhere else? That might seem like a stretch. After all, the bread still tastes like bread and the wine still tastes like wine. Baptisms don’t come with angels singing hallelujahs. When Scripture is read, I don’t hear the voice of God, I hear the voice of Frank. And I have a hard time seeing the face of God in all the gathered body—I know some of them too well. Bread and wine? The water of baptism? It just seems too simple, too ordinary, to bear the presence of God.

But then I remember that Phillip and Thomas and Peter were once saying the same thing. “Could God really be present as this carpenter’s son from Nazareth? We’ve known plenty of carpenter’s sons and none of them seemed divine. Where’s the majesty? Where’s the splendor? It’s just too simple, too ordinary, to be God among us.” And yet, the Holy Spirit worked, and they saw the majesty of God in the one who crossed the lines and touched the lepers, called the tax collectors, blessed the children. The Spirit worked and they saw the splendor of divine love in the cross and in the empty tomb. The Spirit worked and they saw the ordinary bear the extraordinary, God present among us.

And the same Spirit moves among disciples today. The Holy Spirit moves and God is present in the waters of baptism, saying, “You belong to me and nothing can ever change that—not even death.” The Spirit moves and God comes to us in the bread and wine, calling us to the feast that nourishes and strengthens our faith. The Spirit moves and the Word of God is spoken as Frank (and Judith and Amy and Marcus) proclaim “the Word of the Lord.” The Spirit moves and God is with us as we gather, making us the body of Christ in the world, forming, shaping, and sending us for the mission that God is on. In worship, the Holy Spirit of God moves and the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the simple becomes majestic, the everyday becomes sacred.

Imagine this: a divine announcement has been made and the God of our ancestors, the God of our brothers and sisters around the world, is coming. God is present among us on Sunday morning, not in the extravagance of royal jewels, but in the simple gifts of bread and wine. God is present among us on Sunday morning, not in extraordinary miracles, but in the divine baptismal promise of God’s eternal grace. God is present among us on Sunday morning, not in booming voices from the sky, but in the voices proclaiming God’s Word and the faithful hearers receiving it. The next time you are gathered with the rest of the body on Sunday morning, listen, and you will hear the sound of the angels singing, “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!”

Newsletter Article:

**Witness**

**By Pastor Greg Mileski**

I went to a big college in a sizable city. Not exactly the kind of place normally associated with religious fervor. Still, whenever I was out and about, I would regularly encounter people wanting to tell me about their Christianity and invite me to their campus ministry or church. I guess it was just the zeal that college students bring to most everything but homework. Things always took a turn for the worse when they found out that I already went to a church, but one that was clearly wrong. These folks were always polite but rarely respectful, and I recognized little of the God I’d heard about at First English Lutheran Church. I soon found myself dreading these encounters.

Chances are you’ve had similar experiences. More than likely, someone somewhere along the line wanted to tell you about their Christian faith and left you feeling something less than joyful. And chances are, when the word “witness” is uttered, you find yourself remembering this unpleasantness. If you’re like me, then, witness (and its sister, evangelism) is just one of those things Lutherans don’t do, like clapping in church, sticking our hands up when we sing, or saying “Amen” anywhere but at the end of a prayer.

My friends, it is time to repent. In the years since, I have seen a certain kind of Christianity become common in the public imagination. When friends of my generation describe the God they hear about in popular culture, it is an utterly foreign thing that resembles the God of Scripture in only the vaguest sense. Our society has come to view God as more interested in people’s sex lives than their spiritual lives, more concerned with blessing America than the rest of creation, more the trumpet of some imagined rapture than the still, small voice who sends us to feed the hungry. Even the word evangelical has come to mean something quite different than our faith—a political orientation rather than a love of the “good news” of God’s Word made flesh.

Now, dear Lutherans, this cultural shift did not happen because of us. But I know that I have missed countless opportunities to speak a word of the faith that we share—to speak a word of grace to those burdened by their failings, to speak a word of hope to those oppressed by their despair, to speak a word of humility and compassion to those certain of their self-righteousness—and I suspect that I am not the only one.

But here’s the real rub: it’s not that I haven’t been a witness, it’s that I’ve been a poor one. You see, we do not get to choose whether to be a witness or not. Because we are baptized, because we have been made a part of this movement, because we are the kind of the people who read synod newsletter articles, we are already witnesses. We are witnesses whether we want to be or not, whether we think we prepared or not, whether we choose to talk about our faith or to keep quiet.

This is the thought that stops me in my tracks: Everything we do tells the world what we believe about who God is and who we are. When we let our worry that we might not have all the right answers keep us from speaking a word, we tell others that this faith is about being able to pass a quiz. When we turn Christmas and Easter into high holidays of consumerism, we tell others that our possessions will bring us true and lasting peace. When we choose brunch over worship, sign our children up for sports leagues that play on Sunday mornings, or stand silently instead of singing the best songs of generations past, we tell others and ourselves that gathering with God’s people to worship simply isn’t very important.

Of course, we are all (and we will remain) guilty of being imperfect witnesses. But far too often, we let our fear and anxiety keep us from sharing the hope that we have within us. And so many of our friends and neighbors are crying out for hope, for grace, for a word of freedom!

I am convinced that the word that we have to share is the word that our world longs to hear. In a culture realizing that a drive to accumulate wealth and possessions and living for one’s own wants and needs leaves one empty and unsatisfied, we can tell of a Messiah who empties himself for the sake of others.

In a world where spirituality seems vague and disconnected from anything real, we have a worship grounded in centuries of tradition and centered around God’s real presence in the simple gifts of bread and wine and water and word.

In a globalizing economy where more and more wealth is being concentrated among the few and where the impoverished are increasingly scorned, we proclaim a God of justice and of righteousness who calls us into real community with neighbors we love as ourselves.

It’s true, if we invite someone to worship, they might think it odd and say no. And yes, if we invite someone to pray with us, they (and we!) might be a little uncomfortable. Certainly, if we question the assumptions in our culture about money and poverty, people could think we’re weird. Make no mistake, talking about our faith can be scary. But I am convinced that keeping silent about it is scarier still.

The God who spoke the distant stars into being has spoken a life-altering word of grace and peace to us. Let’s share the transformational word we have heard together with a world in need of new birth.



Newsletter Article:

**Welcome**

**By Pastor Greg Mileski**

One of my favorite parts of Scripture is the end of Revelation. I long for the city described there, the new Jerusalem, where the Reign of God comes to fullness. One of my favorite details, easy to miss, concerns the gates of this city. There is a wall—not just anything is the Reign of God, after all—and the wall has twelve gates. And the gates of this city are open wide—all day, every day. I hope this part of Revelation is literal. What a welcome sight to see!

“All are welcome.” I can’t tell you on how many church signs I’ve seen those words. Certainly dozens. Probably hundreds. That can’t really be true, can it? That is such a lofty idea! I wonder what would happen if we put similar lofty perfections on our church signs.

“St. Andrew Lutheran Church. All of us read the Bible every day!”

“Hope Lutheran Church. Where nobody will ever judge you!”

“First Lutheran. Every sermon will knock your socks off!”

“All are welcome.” Well, that’s a nice sentiment, but could it really be true?

The truth is, welcoming everyone is hard. It’s a lot harder than most of us realize. I know what you’re thinking. *My church may not be perfect, but we are certainly welcoming!* And that’s what I think about my congregation, too. After all, each and every Sunday I am greeted by folks with warm smiles and happy hearts, just like all of you. But of course *we* think that *our* congregations are welcoming. We’ve been calling them home for umpteen years. If we didn’t feel welcome, we’d have probably stopped going long ago.

And that’s the thing, isn’t it? “Welcome” isn’t for insiders but for outsiders. The question isn’t whether *we* feel welcome in our congregations. The question is do *they* feel welcomed here? Do the people who aren’t here, the people who might be walking in for the first time, the people who are deciding if they will walk in for a second time, do *they* feel welcomed? That might be a different story. After all, *most of them aren’t here*.

Let’s ask this question: Can you think of somebody who would be *un*welcome in your congregation? What do they look like? Are they a different ethnicity? Are they differently-abled and can they get around your building? How do they dress? Are they dressed too casually, or maybe in clothes that haven’t seen a washing machine lately? Who comes with them? A live-in girlfriend? A same-sex partner? A rowdy toddler? Are they used to worshipping in a different manner? Would they put their hands up when they sing or pray?

And when I say unwelcome, I don’t mean that someone would come and chase them out with a stick. Good heavens! None of our churches are unwelcoming like that! Any of those people, no matter what they’re wearing or who they’re with or however high they stick up their hands, would be welcome to come in and worship with us, of course. But *welcome*, real and true welcome, runs much more deeply than just being allowed to come in and stay for a while.

In our congregations, in our little slice of the New Jerusalem, welcome must mean more than simply permitting someone to come and eat the cookies and drink the coffee. Welcome must mean that someone can come in and *join us just as they are*. Welcome doesn’t mean that you are allowed to come in. It means that *you*, with all your gifts and talents, with all your baggage and failures, with your fears, with your riches, with your poverty, are allowed to come in and *be you*.

And that’s why welcome is so hard. We want people to come in and be us. It’s easier that way. We know us. We feel safe as us. But welcome means we let people come in and be themselves, be who they are, and that means that our community changes, just a bit. And that’s risky. We are always more ready to hold on to what we have than we are to become something new.

But we are not called to build a club. We are not called to stay the same. We are called to be transformed by the moving of the Spirit and to live in the light of the Reign of God. And one of the ways we can do that is by welcoming our fellow children of God, encouraging them to share their gifts and talents freely in ways that shape our faith communities. In so doing, we open our gates and we open ourselves to the ways that the Spirit is moving and we glimpse, just a bit more clearly, the coming of the new Jerusalem. Amen.