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2nd Sunday after Epiphany
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Samuel was called in the middle of the night. The voice of the Lord was so subtle that he didn't recognize it. The child, the apprentice to the prophet Eli, was called while he was alone in the temple, kept company only by the ark and the lamp. The voice of the Lord was not accompanied by an entourage, there were no trumpets and angels, no parting of seas or skies, no procession of great church leaders.

The Lord called Samuel by name, quietly, so that Samuel thought he heard the voice of his beloved mentor, Eli.

There are scores of examples of experiences of worship when hearts and minds were changed, when God's voice was heard. I have heard of the experiences you have had here when you have been moved to tears, moved to action, or moved to greater faith. I know it happens in the course of our regular Sunday worship. I have experienced it myself.

We have, at times, gained members into God's community because the way we worship and the space in which we worship can be beautiful and moving. Our worship can attract people, it can help them find a spiritual home. It can and it does.

But there's a worship movement right now in Christendom that bothers me, and I want to take a few minutes this morning to help clear it up for our community. It is a movement called "attractional worship". The concept is based on the idea that the purpose of worship is evangelism. The purpose of worship, for those who espouse this idea, is to bring people to Jesus. Or, alternately, to provide people with an experience of God.

For these worship leaders, the driving force in worship planning is the manufacture of an experience that can evoke strong emotion that people will equate with experiencing the divine. In theory, when word gets out that this particular church has these strong emotive experiences as the centerpiece of their worship, more people come for the show.

But, contrary to popular belief and popular Christian culture these days, that's not the point of worship.

You heard me right. We do not worship in order to bring people to Jesus. We do not worship to attract people into our pews. We who plan these times we have together do not plan experiences of God for you. We do not attempt to evoke emotion from you. We do not expect that our worship will bring Jesus closer to you. I cannot draw down the divine, no matter how much I'd like to some days.

I will not stand here before you and tell you that the good team of people that put our heads and talents together to plan our worship calendar do not work really really hard to make this that we have together every week as life giving as possible. This thing we do together week in and week out is not a haphazard collection of random events. It is well planned and well thought-out, pulled together by a crew with many decades of liturgy experience between us. We want to offer an experience of *worship* that is free of extraneous fluff, and that always upon always points to the One for whom we gather. But we would never claim to offer you an experience of God.

The experience of attractional worship is focussed more on entertainment value. The lights, the stage, the screen, the band, none of which are inherently wrong in a worship setting, but all together have the effect of dazzling those gathered. The audience is entertained with songs about and stories of Jesus without challenge and often without participation. And they leave feeling good, maybe even transported.

There is nothing wrong with enjoying the show. And while it is not my choice, there is nothing wrong with enjoying Christian rock music. But there is something very, very wrong with using worship as a tool for anything other than worshipping God. It can be beautiful and moving but is not a show. It can inspire people to a commitment of faith, but it is not evangelism. It can convict people to give of their time, talent and treasure, but it is not a stewardship exercise.

UMC pastor and theology blogger Jonathan Aigner writes of the function of worship:
We don't worship together to attract unbelievers.

We worship together because God is worthy.

We worship together because this gracious God has called us into his story and grafted us together as covenant people.

We worship together because we desperately need to tell and retell and hear and rehear that story.

We worship together to be refocused, reshaped, renewed by God's gifts. We need liturgy. We need Word and Sacrament

I will not for a moment pretend that Episcopalians, even those of us from All Saints', corner the market on authentic, Spirit-centered worship. But the reason I have chosen this path, and I suspect this is true for many of you, is that when I worship here, with these words, with these hymns, with these people, I am able to set my own agenda out of the way and let words passed down over hundreds of years lift my own prayers to the God I love, the one I know loves me in return. Those prayers will be mixed with the prayers of God's beloved across time and across space, those who have come to weep, those who have come to praise, those who have come to listen for a guiding word.

When I hear these prayers whispered, sung, spoken, I am able, along with the rest of you, to be recalibrated for the work I have ahead of me, the Gospel work that we are all to be about. I worship here because I need you around me. And you need me. And we need to worship God, at the very least to remind ourselves who created the heavens and the earth, who made us from dirt, who conquered death for us.

Samuel was not in the temple to be entertained. He was not lying in the circle of the light of God waiting to be spoon fed. He was not looking around, expecting someone else to make God relevant to his time or culture. He was not expecting an experience of worship that would move him to tears. He was resting in that holy place. He was opening his ears and his heart.

German Theologian Karl Barth wrote a passionate treatise to ministers, *The Word of God and The Word of Man*. What he says of dogmatic teaching can apply here, too. He says, "The fact is man cannot believe what is simply held *before* him. He can believe nothing that is not *within*

him and *before* him. He cannot believe what does not reveal itself to him, that has not the power to penetrate *to him*."

As beloved as we are of God, we cannot manufacture experiences of God. We cannot claim to reveal the Holy Spirit. We cannot bring Jesus into worship. Not only is it not our job to do so, it is not within our power. To think otherwise is absurd. We can invite others to worship with us, to be a part of this community with Word and Table at its core, but we cannot make them believe either through dogma or manipulation.

If, God forbid, our church building fell down... if we had no pews or organ... if there was no stained glass or vestments... no altar or pulpit... what would be left of All Saints'? What would we do on Sunday mornings?

The answer to that question is: we would worship. We would rest in the glory of 600 years of prayers in our prayer book, we would listen for the voice of God in the silence, we would come together around any table we could find. We would break bread together, we would sing together, we would hear the word revealed together. We would worship God because that is what we need to do, our souls long for it, our lives are strengthened by it. We would worship God because our community lives by it and because we are better together for it. We would worship God because God deserves our devotion and because while we are unworthy to give it, it is, in the end, all we have to offer.

We would come together on bare ground and we would still have a God to worship. And from there we would go forth into a world and with eyes open for experiences of God anywhere and everywhere.