

WGUMC July 10, 2016 "The When and Where of Worship"
John 4:5-30; 39

Over the last few weeks, we've talked about the What, the Why, and the Who of worship. Today, we have the When and the Where. Before we start to talk about when and where worship should be, again we have to think about when and where God will be. Of course, God is everywhere and "everywhen" as Australian aboriginals say. But we don't tend to worship God just anywhere or "anywhen." For each of us, there is a definite when and a where for worship. This morning, I want to argue that worship happens whenever and wherever we are able to lift the veil that separates earth from heaven, or our world from God's world.

That veil has a long history. Remember when Moses was talking face-to-face with God. His face would shine with the glory of God and he would make the people afraid, because they believed that no one could see the face of God and live. So after talking with God, Moses would put a veil over his face.

So the veil came to be a symbol of the separation between a holy God and a not-so-holy people.

Moses even designs the Tent of Meeting with that separation in mind. He hangs a curtain in the tent to seal off the Holy of Holies. Later, the temple will have one, too, and no one but the high priests will be able to draw back that curtain and cross that boundary between earth and heaven.

Fast forward to the scene of the Crucifixion in Matthew's Gospel. At the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain in the temple is torn in two. [Matthew 27:51] Whether or not this is historically true, Matthew is trying to make the point that it is spiritually true. When the people saw Jesus hanging on the cross, they saw the very face of God and lived! Even the Roman centurion saw it because he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" [Matthew 27:54] So the curtain was torn in two because there was no need for it anymore, because Jesus had torn down the barrier between God and us. No need for veiled

faces. When we see Jesus, we see God, and then and there, we worship.

Worship happens when and where the curtains that are closing us off from the Holy One are torn in two. Celtic Christians had a name for special places of divine encounter. They called them "thin places." They had a saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even smaller.

Episcopal priest, author, teacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes thin places this way: "Thin places are transparent places or moments...[that] make you more aware of the thin veil between apparent reality and deeper reality...[they] pull aside the veil for just a moment, so you can see through."

[Interview @ <http://flycatherjournal.org/bbt-interview.php>]

There are countless thin places on this planet and even travel guides to take you on a world tour of them. There are the official holy places, such as Machu Picchu in Peru; the

Western Wall in Jerusalem; the Blue Mosque in Istanbul; St. Peter's in Rome; Stonehenge in England; and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. But there are many, many unofficial places, too. Some of you will find a thin place on a beach or in a forest or on a mountain. Some of you will encounter one in a child's peaceful sleep, a stranger's friendly smile or in a lover's warm embrace. But thin places aren't all serene and beautiful. You might find yourself in a thin place in a homeless camp or a hospital room or on a mission trip.

When you live in a desert, a well can be a thin place. In John's Gospel, the veil was lifted and heaven came crashing to earth one day for the woman at Jacob's well. Now Jacob's well was a most ancient well. It held many memories of Father Jacob. It also held water, which must have seemed nothing short of miraculous, being in the desert. We Californians are just beginning to appreciate how miraculous water is, what a symbol of life it is. The Samaritan woman came to the well

every day to get water. But on this day, Jesus said to her, "I am the well. I am the water you are thirsting for." "Give me this water," she said, and the veil began to lift.

So the two of them went on talking for a while. The woman wanted to argue with Jesus about the Where of worship. Samaritans worshiped on Mt. Gerizim; the Jews in Jerusalem. That's like saying, the traditional service is in the sanctuary; the contemporary service is in the fellowship hall. But Jesus says to her, "The hour is coming, when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship [God] in spirit and truth...." In other words, it doesn't matter where you worship so much as how you worship.

Worship can happen anytime, anywhere as long as you worship in spirit and truth. Only then will the curtain part and the veil lift enough for us to see God.

The Samaritan woman saw Jesus and he saw her. In fact, he saw right through her. Jesus knew everything there was to know about her: everything she had ever done and everyone she had ever loved. He unveiled her. Not only could she see him, but she could see herself as well. Worship does the same for us. It lifts the veil from our eyes so that we can see God. And when we see God, we see ourselves in spirit and truth.

Jesus saw the woman who had had five husbands and was currently living with a man who wasn't her husband. But Jesus did not condemn her. He simply acknowledged her apparent reality and then promised her a deeper reality. The well was deep. He had no bucket. But the Living Water didn't need one because it had the power to gush up to eternal life on its own. The woman took one sip and left her water jar and went back to the city and to tell her story. All we need is one sip of real life and we will never have to haul water again.

Last week I said that we cannot worship God if we have never encountered God. Thin places are where heaven comes close and we encounter God. Church buildings are traditionally designed to thin the boundary between heaven and earth, between God and us.

Just look at a gothic cathedral. The heavy stones testify to the eternity of God. The high ceilings point to the transcendence of God. The stained glass windows change the light as it shines through them, beckoning us into the presence of God. The sight of candles and the smell of incense take us to another dimension. All of this to remind us that God's world is qualitatively different than the world we live in today. Then the organ starts to play and as it echoes around the sanctuary, it acts like God's sonar, probing the depths of our souls. For many people, stepping into a gothic cathedral is like stepping into the anteroom of heaven.

Now, the Protestant Reformation didn't trust these thin places so much because they suspected that sacred wells and stained glass windows appealed too much to our inner pagan. So, many Protestant groups radically stripped down their churches. If you've ever been to Boston, you'll know that the Puritan churches there are very cold and very bare.

Eventually, the stained glass came back, but it was removed again during the "worship wars" of the 80's and 90's. That was a time when church leaders wanted the "unchurched" to feel more comfortable, wanted to make worship more accessible, and so they moved it out of the sanctuary. Some set up worship in the fellowship hall or they built new churches altogether in buildings that looked more like furniture stores than houses of worship. But after having worshiped for a while on that bare mountain, it appears that we are heading back to the other mountain again.

The Santa Cruz Bible Church is a big church not far from the tiny Methodist Church I served back in 2000. They worship in a building that doesn't look much like a church, but more like a corporate campus. While I was there, they hired a pastor to reach out to the next generation of young people, and he started a worship service on a Friday night. Eventually they decided to become their own church and to move into their own building.

After a search for available space, this congregation of 20-somethings moved into the old First Presbyterian Church in downtown Santa Cruz. It has a steeple. It has a high-peaked ceiling. It has stained glass windows. Why did these young people choose an old church? Because spiritually-starved millennials are desperate for their own thin places where the veil can be lifted from their cold, bare lives for just long enough for them to glimpse a deeper, more vibrant, more glorious life. They didn't grow up in church. They aren't carrying any

baggage about worship. They just long to meet a God who can see through their veil, can see everything they have ever done and everything they can become. Like us, they long to worship in spirit and truth and they call their new church Vintage Faith. First Presbyterian was a thin place for its parishioners way back when and for a new generation, it is again. And that gives me hope that our God who is everywhere and everywhen will help us worship in spirit and truth in Willow Glen.