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March 4, 2009

Lenten Worship - What Does This Mean?

The days and acts of remembrances in worship services today are mainly held by liturgical churches. The contemporary church may mention significant days of the Church Calendar, but most do not hold worship services that center around these celebrations such as Lent. Your church may or may not celebrate the significant days such as Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday (yes this spelling is correct, also means Holy Thursday – The Last Supper & The Garden events) and Good Friday and Holy Saturday. We have a responsibility to learn, define, worship and highlight the essentials of these celebrations because they give us a deeper understanding of our relationship and worship of our Lord and the knowledge of his Word and the heritage of the Church. We derive a greater appreciation and systemic in our understanding of what it means as sinful man being saved by holy God. True, most churches every Sunday, share this importance of a loving God saving sinful man. But during this season of Lent, we have a special opportunity to savor and experience these marked days of history when God miraculously brought man from death to life through Jesus Christ. We also walk with the Messiah, as together, we journey on the road to the cross, to His death and to His resurrection. Lent is a time to remember and mourn of our sin as we seek our need for God. In need of His mercy and grace, we reflect on our own baptism and what it means to live as God's child.

For me, I never truly understood the impact of Lent until I began serving in a Lutheran church back in 2002. No, I'm not Lutheran, not Baptist, not anything other but only a follower of Jesus. The experience in this church is one that I would never trade, as I learned the deeper importance of acts of praise, worship, the Word and his loving relationship with man. At first I thought, this is weird! I'm not Lutheran, not Catholic: why am I here? But as I spent more time in dialogue with the pastor, in discussing the rich theology and history of the church, I began to understand that there is more to worship and more to observe in the Christian faith than what I realized. This propelled me into an everlasting pursuit to understand the true biblical sense of worship and not just "singing" and "listening" through songs and sermons. I learned: the worship service in itself is not for you, to do cool songs and hear snappy messages, experience over-sensory media and the bells and whistles of other AV technologies. All of these tools (and that's what they are not our focus) are great, but how are they used in the context of a worship service in teaching and demonstrating who God is to our lost, broken and fragmented communities? Here's another challenge, how do you highlight the significant days such as Lent in a church that does not follow the Church Calendar or highlights unmentionable celebratory days? How do we use message, media, song and other art forms to convey important Church days and/or significant elements in Christian worship?

Finding words, prayers, songs and videos that relate to Lent, we can speak of its importance in a relative way. In other words, as much as we declare the hope and

salvation that Christ brings, we also need to examine why Christ came to save sinful man. This brings us into a greater wonder and discovery of God's deep love and the splendor of his mercy and grace. When you think about it, we are like ashes; without Christ's love and presence, our lives are meaningless, worthless, lonely, separated and disconnected. When we come into relationship with God through Jesus, we experience His kindness, nature and love. We receive his grace, a welcome seat at the Table, an opportunity to share in the heavenly feast of God's Fellowship and to bring with us others that they too, may partake in the life and family of Holy God.

I encourage you during this season, to look into in the study, significance and the meaning of Lent. One book I recommend is by author Robert Webber, entitled *Worship Old & New*. As you discover the impacts of the Early Church, important marks of history and significant events, discuss them with your pastor, share your learnings with your worship team, include your own family household and ultimately plant the seeds of truth in your worship services. Many art forms can be used to illustrate and teach the season of Lent and meaning of Christ (i.e. 16th Century Church icons, stained glass and relics). Whether by message, visual art, film and/or music, it is essential to declare biblical texts that denote the time of preparation before Christ's sacrifice.

May this Lenten season be filled with inspiration and wonder as God leads you into a deeper understanding of himself through worship, the Word, prayer, and communion as you respond to his mercy and grace. As together, we later conclude on holy week, as one Body and one voice: Halleluiah, Christ has come, Christ is risen and Christ will come again! Amen!

February 25, 2009

Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down

Today is Ash Wednesday. Did this though occur to you? I know for me, I had to catch myself. As we become adults, we tend to leave behind elements from our past or heritage. The same is true of the Christian faith. We may learn great theology in the church from early Sunday school studies or classes, but later we often forget our learnings as we become distracted or fade into other responsibilities.

Some contemporary views in churches do not focus so much on the Old Testament, but rather the New Testament. We are slow to recall historical practices of the Early Church as seen in Acts. It is in the study of theology and our Church history that brings more meaning and significance to worship. More importantly, we develop a greater understanding in how and why we worship and praise God. Besides Good Friday and Easter, as a child, I've never had a clue about Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday. In addition, what was this term Lent anyway (?), aside from something I found in the corner of my pockets. These terms may sound foreign to you as well. My only memory as a kid was on Easter Sunday, unwrapping the fancy wrapped pieces of candy and pestering my younger sister. Today, Lent and Holy week are not highlighted in mainstream contemporary times. Good Friday usually means a day off from work, while

Easter Sunday is about a bunny who leaves behind candy pellets or eggs (watch which ones you pickup). Many people and Christians today, leave out the preceding Holy days of Easter; it is here where we find a time of greater reflection, significance and meaning.

Lent signifies a period of preparation before Easter and is marked by Ash Wednesday, while it concludes with Holy week ending with Easter Sunday. Some suggest that Ash Wednesday began around the second or fifth century. The meaning of ashes originated from the Old Testament, in which the Ancient Church used to symbolize repentance. The significance of using ashes is derived from early church practices of burning palms from the previous Palm Sunday. Usually the pastor takes the ashes on the end of his thumb and makes a sign of the cross on the forehead of worshipers. Yes, this happened way before the Catholic church. We use ashes because we identify ourselves to the dust of creation; we remember that we are dust, and it is God who breathed life into man. Genesis 3:19 says this, "remember man that you are dust and to dust you shall return." These words remind us of our being and nature, as we recognize the status of man and the Holy status of Almighty God. Dust signifies a time to dedicate oneself to prayer, repentance, self-examination and renewal. You see this personification every time through out the Bible when individuals have covered themselves in ashes and sackcloth in order to humble themselves (i.e. Mordecai, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job and Daniel). Through the Lenten season we cover ourselves with humility to reflect and examine of our need for God, while at the end we proclaim on Easter Sunday: Alleluia, Christ has risen! Thus, we have a deeper sense, joy and adoration in celebrating our new lives in Christ: being buried with Him, being raised with Him and to live in faith, until His second coming. What songs, art forms and messages come to mind when you think about these truths?

February 18, 2009

What Is The Most Embarrassing Moment In Worship?

Whether we lead worship or participate in some form, we all have experienced the unpredictable, the unbelievable and the unreal-are-you-kidding-me circumstances. I have known worship leaders and teams who have really succeeded in becoming the most embarrassing wonders of the world.

Band starts in the wrong key, singers in another, associate pastor dresses up as a sumo wrestler, worship leader backstage left his head-worn mic on, drama actor split his pants and/or misspelled words that were projected during a worship song. You may have better stories.

What is the most embarrassing situation you recently experienced in worship?

2.19.09 Post: John

One bright Sunday, the choir was preparing a rousing song. The soloist came ready to "sing her heart out"! Expectantly she was dressed modestly for church but her hair was especially stunning. Later during the service, I found out why! I was at the ready, seated at the piano to accompany the choir at the piano. The soloist took the microphone and off we went. While accompanying the choir, I would close my eyes. On this particular occasion, my attention should have been elsewhere. The song was upbeat and exciting. I could tell that both the choir and the congregation were really getting into the message of the song. As the song neared its conclusion, a roar rose from the congregation. This was nothing new, but something told me to look up. My glance to the other side of the platform revealed what I initially believed was a puppy. It was not! It was the soloists wig! Understanding flooded my mind. As she sang, the weave heaved! Being the consummate professional, though embarrassed, she did not stop or miss a beat. When she had sung her last note, she coolly walked over to the pile of store-bought hair, cradled it in her arms and walked off. I recall another occasion.

2.19.09 Post: Heather

My husband asked me to play shaker once for the congregation when the drummer was MIA - Lord I Lift Your Name on High...shake shake shake...

2.19.09 Post: Greg

I had a hi hat stand fall apart on me last Sunday.

2.19.09 Post: Toby

Well, I wasn't leading congregational singing at the time. I was singing a solo. My cousin's wife had given me a wild cherry LifeSaver just before going up on the platform. In the middle of my song I started salivating profusely and had to swallow hard (the big slurp and gulp). I cracked up and couldn't continue.

I went back and sat down next to my Mom. Her encouraging words to me were (and I quote), "Well, I guess you're human after all."

Thanks, Mom!

2.19.09 Post: Victoria

I have one from a solo performance (that just reminds us that we should be in communication as worship leaders/team members with the sound department). I was performing a song with an unusually long, awkward entrance. So, I planned to speak a few words during the intro. When the sound guy heard me start to speak, he turned off my track. So I spoke, then had to wait for the long intro to start again and finish before singing the song.

I'd say that on worship team, my most difficult moments were those when 15 minutes before service, the worship leader decided to teach us a new song...so we did our best,

but spent the worship time straining to see the screens to either side so that we could learn the lyrics...as we lead worship.

February 18, 2009
You Never Know

You never know who may be listening, you never know who maybe watching. One day I was to lead worship at a friend's church. We were going over the last plans of our music. All of the sudden, a person on the music team barked at another team member. He was upset because something wasn't done in the way he preferred. They argued. The disgruntled individual stormed off. Both of these guys continued to ramble on about their dislikes of each other and having to be in the same church together. All the while, there was a person sitting in the back row of the worship center. She witnessed the whole event. Watching sheepishly and lowering her head, she stood up and walked out. My heart sank. The worship leader later addressed the two individuals. He later told me that the young woman who walked out was definitely a new guest. The worship leader had never seen her before. We figured that she arrived early before the service to "check things out." Well, she did and got an earful. I was reminded that it is so necessary to watch our behaviors and get a handle on our emotions. As we are entrusted to lead God's praise, there comes a line of responsibility. There is a cause to be discrete and professional. You never know who may be watching. You never know what kind of influence you are airing. To this day, I shutter at the thought of what this woman perceived about churches and/or God.

February 16, 2009
Fireball Over Austin

<http://www.youtube.com/v/1wCOt3eZt7I&hl=en&fs=1>

OK, so fireballs from the sky. Are we living in the end times? Is this the fire and brimstone raining down from heaven that was foretold? Well, we are living in the end times. No, this is not a fire-storm judgment from God; just satellite or comet debris from space. Maybe someone thought they saw a fiery image of St. Paul or possibly Elvis. You can be sure that this street in Austin, TX will be turned into an alien memorial of some sort. Something may even show up on eBay. Who knows? All we do know is that Jesus already said there will be signs and events to announce his coming (Lk. 21:11). We put our faith in Him and His word. It is amazing how and where people put their faith. It seems to me that it takes more faith to believe in something other than God. In the case of this video, its just space trash falling from above. When the Lord does return, the reality will be more than what the human mind can comprehend. This video and many other signs around the world cannot compare - they are just a vapor. The

challenge: are we ready for His return? Who are we loving into the Kingdom, so they can be ready too?

February 13, 2009
American Idol

You watch it too. I have come to understand that American Idol is pure cheap entertainment at its finest. We pull for the underdogs and vote for our favorites. The judges banter about the audition process and make comments to the contestants. The beginning auditions are hilarious. We witness the many walks of life, the silly get-ups and the variety of sounds. The ones who nail the audish victoriously go to Hollywood. The ones who don't go home in tears. Either way, we enjoy the show because it makes us laugh, cry and faint all at the same time. Unfortunately, there are contestant who don't make the cut and feel that their dreams are crushed. Some kick and scream, while others respectfully walk away. Some unveil their ill feelings to the judges, while others thank them for the opportunity. All in all, this show gives people a chance for the voice to be heard - for better or for worse.

But what about the identity of the person? Our personal identity? We are all talented in many things. However, we can damage ourselves when we put our complete personhood into our gifting. Further damage is caused by allowing others to determine our self-worth - expectations. Our personhood is in Christ. The Bible says who we are, not the world. We are His kid, His child. Real life is found in the fellowship of His Spirit. Because we live in a fallen world, we are subjected to the hurts of life. The difference is, we are not defined by our past or present situation. We are defined by the Authorship of God. Our identify comes from Christ, being hidden in Him. Real life is given by the Spirit as we see our reflection in Christ. He has called us by name. He has drawn us with loving kindness. Even when the world rejects us, He holds us in His hand. We can make an idol out of many things, but these are worthless in comparison to the One who bought you and cherishes you for Himself.

“Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.” - Col.3:3-5

3.11.09 Post: Sara

I recently came across your blog and have been reading along. I thought I would leave my first comment. I don't know what to say except that I have enjoyed reading. Nice blog. I will keep visiting this blog very often. Sarah

3.23.09 Post: Julie

It would be great if this message could be given at the end of American Idol show.... oh how people need to know these things and above all.....to know Him.

February 10, 2009

Hope

I was astonished. As of last night, my best friend's father passed away. After years of health battles with a deteriorating heart, he went to be with the Lord. I've met grandpa Lain a few years ago. A sweet man with a soft voice and gentle sparkle in his eyes. You easily knew what he treasured. The simple things. Faith, hope and love. When we got word last night, I quickly called my best friend to extend our sympathy and prayers. As always, my best friend was solid, secure and at peace. I have seen my him go through many other challenges before and I am always surprised by his resolve. He is always calm. Most often, when you offer words of comfort, he begins to comfort you. I can see how his father's life made such an impact. You can see the hope through his father's eyes.

Hope is an amazing reality. But what is hope? Is hope an expectation that guides us through the fog? Is it something that falls from the sky to bring relief? Is hope really a tangible thing? When I looked up the word hope, I found something different:

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Rom 5:1-3.

"while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." - Titus 2:13

This hope, is not what the world can provide. Hope is defined by the reality, life and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The kind of peace I saw in the eyes of grandpa Lain was the hope of Christ. As Titus says, Christ is our blessed hope. Not found in things, solutions or people. These all have their purpose and position in this earthly life, but they do not guarantee our eternal frame. How do we extend this kind of hope to others? Being filled with this kind of hope flows from Christ. This kind of hope is attractive and fulfilling. Hope is like a water well, overflowing and cannot be contained. This is parallel to the love that Christ offers in those who are thirsty.

It is a curious blessing to receive an encouraging word from friends and especially from strangers. Christ - our hope is our guarantee of sanctity and eternal life. We move from faith to faith and from strength to strength, believing in the power of the Resurrection and Return. He is our living hope. While we remain on earth, may each day be spent abiding in the hope and peace of Christ. Spend a moment today sharing this kind of

hope to the people around you. This can be done through words or by actions alone. What a surprise it will be when our Hope appears.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” - 1 Pet. 1:3

February 9, 2009
Going Where You Do Not Know

Yesterday we were studying the Scripture of Gen. 12:1-9. God instructed Abram to leave his country, people and his father's household. He was to pick up everything and move - right away. In verse 4, the Scripture begins with these words: "So Abraham left." What I find fascinating about this passage is that there was no conversation. There was no questioning, no guessing games, no argument nor self pity on Abram's part. He responded simply by obeying with action. I think about times when I rationalize with God or begin to start a dialogue. Simply, when God instructs us, he is not asking for permission to move within our lives. He does listen to our prayers, desires and needs. He wants us to bring our concerns to Him. However, when God is giving us a directive, there is no conversation, there is an active response on our part.

Here's a question to ponder: are we giving ourselves permission for God to move within our lives? That's right. Are we allowing God to move? Abram could have shut his ears and quenched the voice of God. He could have stayed in the land of familiar to play it safe. He could have remained in control of his own destiny. If he had, I wonder what the lineage of Christ would look like. I wonder what blessings would be missed. I wonder where we would be as the people of God. It is a blessing to not be in this position because Abram obeyed. When God calls us to move, act on it. The Spirit works among us in powerful ways. he engineers our circumstances (Rm. 8:28). When we remain in prayer and in step with the Spirit, the Lord orders our steps and directs our thoughts every time. We can trust in the Savior, he knows what is best. Even when we can't see with our eyes, our faith can see things that make the impossible - possible. Because of his unfailing love, we can trust Him, even when we do not know where we are going.

January 9 2009
A Prayer For You

A sweet friend of mine sent this prayer-mail to me and I want to share this with you. May the Lord bless you upon this reading my friends.

Keep The Faith

"Ephesians 5:15 encourages us to 'be very careful how you live, making the most of your time.' Each and every one of us is going through tough times right now, but God is getting ready to bless you in a way that only He can. Keep the faith.

This prayer is powerful, and prayer is one of the best gifts we receive. There is no cost but a lot of rewards. Let's continue to pray for one another. The prayer: Father, I ask You to bless my friends, relatives and those that I care deeply for, who are reading this right now. Show them a new revelation of Your love and power.

Holy Spirit, I ask You to minister to their spirit at this very moment. Where there is pain, give them Your peace and mercy. Where there is self-doubt, release a renewed confidence through Your grace. Where there is need, I ask you to fulfill their needs. Bless their homes, families, finances, their goings and their comings. In Jesus' precious name. Amen."

Share this prayer today with four people that you know to bless the rest of their week.

January 5, 2009
R-U Certain?

Back from the Holidays! Hope your Christmas/New Year's was the best. What does the New Year of 2009 hold for you? A better question may be, what has God called you to do and to complete? This second thought speaks to my heart. We tend to look at the things that we don't have, rather than what we do have. This half-empty perspective affects what we desire to accomplish. It also seals our fate. For me, longing for what I do not have clouds my vision. In fact, when I am looking for the visible, I am in deed not walking in faith. How can I? When I am too busy to find a sign, I am veering off the road. Think about all that you completed or still have left to complete from 2008. What has God called you too?

I ran across this verse today that really grabbed me by the throat: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." - Heb. 11:1. The question that ran through my mind was: am I certain? Yes, I am certain that if God gave me ability, opportunity and His wisdom, I have every reason to complete the work He's called me to do. Ephesians already has said that He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1). What better blessing in life is there? Having your own way? No, because Proverbs reminds us that our own way, without leaning on His understanding, will ultimately lead to death. So think of what God has already given you in order to complete His work in 2009. You may already know what this work is even as you read these words. Well then my friend, go and do. Trust in the Lord and be certain to make the most of every opportunity as he provides. He is with you in prayer and in Spirit as we walk on. May this verse encourage your souls and lift your hearts for the New Year: "Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means." - 2Cor. 8:11.

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