

Not Just Another Worship Service

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church Pastor Tyson Labuhn

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Many of us have felt it, and it seems to be getting worse. *"Do I have to?" "What difference does it make anyway?" "It's the same thing every Sunday." "I'm missing that wow factor."* Even if we don't say it, that's exactly what our old sinful nature wants us to think. It's why we aren't always motivated to come to church. Why it's easier to stay home or do anything else that occupies our time on Sunday morning. It's the reason why we're satisfied with less Jesus in our lives, as our daily devotions suffer.

In a recent national poll, fewer and fewer people are attending worship on a regular basis. In 2019, 34% of the US population attended church once or twice a month. In 2020, it was 31%. In 2021, only 28%... And while it wasn't clear if these percentages included those who watched online, with the real existence of screen fatigue – I suspect that it did.

Today you can watch just about any church worship service online, at any time, throughout the week. While we can say that we're staying away because of social distancing, or we've gotten out of the habit, our sinful nature knows exactly what it's doing...Keeping us out of God's Word and away from Jesus. Which is good for our sinful nature, but bad for us. That's why it can be such a battle to actually go to church. It should be one of the most natural things in the world to do, but as long as our sinful nature lives, it isn't. And it only seems to be getting worse.

As we heard in our Gospel reading this morning, that's certainly not the case for Jesus. ***"He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And AS WAS HIS CUSTOM, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day."*** (v.16) Even as a child, He studied and learned God's Word. And as an adult, He was fully devoted to it. He faithfully attended worship services as was His habit and custom. It wasn't a burden, He didn't *"have to"* out of some sense of duty, but He did so because He loved God's Word. That's who He is. It's His life.

Jesus didn't go to the synagogue in Nazareth to simply hear the Word as the *"son of Joseph,"* but rather as a Son of the Father in heaven, to preach and teach the Word to His home congregation. And so, as He stood up to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, He unrolled it and found the place where it was written, ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*** (v.16-19)

It wasn't just another worship service because those who heard Him received more than they expected. They hadn't heard Jesus like this. After Jesus gave back the scroll to the attendant, He sat down and all the eyes of the synagogue were fixed on Him. No one looking away lost in thought, no one closing their eyes, and no one was glancing down at their cellphone. They were focused on Jesus. And that's when He applied the Word of God to their lives. ***"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*** (v.21) In other words, Jesus said to them, what you just heard written by the prophet Isaiah is about Me. And they were able to see that Jesus is the Word of God in human flesh.

That Jesus, that Word made flesh, is living, active and present even here in this sanctuary – for you! He is the Christ the Lord, and The Spirit of the Lord is upon Him. That’s why Jesus went to the synagogue that day. And those who heard Him, began to speak well of Him, marveling at His Words. They had a hard time believing the gracious words that they had heard. And so they began to ask, *“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”*

Jesus had come as the “Son of God,” who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He had come to share the Good News of salvation to those who are poor and needy. To proclaim liberty to those who are in debt in sin. To give sight to those who walk in darkness. To set free those who are in bondage, and to let us know the year of God’s favor had begun. That is how Jesus made Himself known along with His forgiveness that day. And so, today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing – Jesus Christ comes with the Lord’s favor for you.

Jesus, steps into worship for us. He never grows tired of doing so. He fulfills the Word time and time again for all of us. Sundays aren’t about us or what we’re doing here, rather it’s because He is here. Here for those of us who’ve become worn down with life – those who are taken advantage of, who are suffering, oppressed, suffering, and in despair. Even when not everyone believes.

While Jesus proclaimed the Good News by promising to give liberty, restore sight, and give freedom, not everyone liked it. In fact, they couldn’t stand Him so much so that they wanted him dead. They dragged Him out of town to the edge of a cliff. It wasn’t Calvary, but it was close. Jesus came to be the Word that was also despised, rejected, and crucified.

He suffered for you and me because we’ve become indifferent, allowing ourselves to be distracted, and have even grumbled

when it comes to hearing the Word of God. And yet, He continues to come and extend the Lord's favor to us once again. He doesn't need what we give to Him – our sins, our prayers, and our half-hearted devotion, but, week after week, service after service, He comes to forgive, love, and show mercy to us all.

Every Sunday is a little Epiphany because Jesus reveals Himself to us, proclaiming the Lord's favor through His Word and Sacraments. This doesn't come to us free of cost but cost Him everything on the cross that He might be right here with us, to be in our midst, giving to us His forgiveness, grace, and mercy. And when we take this to heart, we wish that we were here even when we can't be.

Many of us have felt it too. It's why so members, who after staying away for a time during this pandemic return and feel it. The joy of being here. Because He makes it so. He makes us more than just our old, sinful natures. His Spirit calls out to us, even drags us out of bed at times, that the Word might be fulfilled again in our hearing, and that, we might have forgiveness and life. Until that day comes when our sinful nature is dead and gone when we're loving every moment of it, living with Him forever.

In Jesus' name, Amen.