

## **“Bow Down and Worship”**

Psalm 95.1-7; Philippians 2.5-11

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“O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!”

Psalm 95 is one of those great psalms that just makes you want to – I don’t know any better way to put it – *bow down and worship God*. Sing out loud, raise a joyful shout, come before him with thanks, kneel before the Lord, our Maker – how many different ways does the psalm express our worship and our devotion? And then it gives *reasons*. The Lord is a *great* God. Not just *God*, not just a *good* God – a *great* God. *The* great King over all other gods. The earth, the mountains, the sea, this whole majestic creation, in all its resplendent beauty, from the Grand Canyon to the Great Barrier Reef, from Machu Picchu to Provence, from the Amazon to the Serengeti, and all the creatures of the earth and sea and sky – it’s *all* God’s, made by him, formed by him; all of it reminders to us of his power and majesty, his appreciation for life and beauty, his magnificent goodness to all of us. So come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

I want to take a little bit of time this morning to think about *worship* and *bowing down*. They are paired together, here in this psalm; “let us worship *and* bow down.” I found a number of instances in the Bible where those two verbs are paired together. When Moses goes to his people in Egypt, after meeting God at the burning bush, and tells them that God is going to liberate them from slavery, the people “bowed down and worshiped.” (Exodus 4.31) When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, fire came down from heaven and the glory of the Lord filled the temple, and the people “bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and worshiped.” (2 Chronicles 7.3) When God spoke to King Jehoshaphat, telling him not to be afraid of the armies advancing against Jerusalem, “all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem bowed down before the Lord, worshiping the Lord.” (2 Chronicles 20.18) And so on. In all these stories, in response to God’s magnificent goodness, they do two things: they *bow down*, and they *worship*. Those are *two separate actions*.

When I was very young, my family worshiped at an Episcopal church. The pews had kneeling racks. Many of you have seen these; there’s this bar that pivots down, and you can lower your legs and kneel on the bar. When I was six we moved to Kansas and started attending a Congregational church. The first Sunday we visited, my dad leaned his head towards my ear and said, “In this church, we don’t kneel.” Which was true; that congregation had no established practice of kneeling during worship services, just like *our* church has no established practice of kneeling. But it’s quite clear in the scriptures:

when it says “bow down,” that’s not just a metaphor: people actually did bow down, get down on their knees, when they were particularly moved by the magnificence and the grandeur and the glory of God.

I wonder if we’re missing something.

When the Israelites living in slavery in Egypt heard what God was going to do during that very first Passover, they “bowed down and worshiped.” (Exodus 12.27) When Joshua beheld the commander of God’s heavenly host, just after arriving in the promised land, Joshua “fell on his face to the earth and worshiped.” (Joshua 5.14) When Job tried to hold onto his faith after receiving word that all his children had been killed, he “fell on the ground and worshiped.” (Job 1.20)

*We worship God.* But do we *bow down* and worship God?

Often what we’ll do is we’ll bow our head when we pray. There are examples of this in scripture, too. When Abraham’s servant, far from home, finds Rebekah and realizes that God had brought him to exactly the right place and exactly the right person, he “bowed his head and worshiped the Lord.” (Genesis 24.26) When Ezra the priest re-instituted worship in Jerusalem, all the people “bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” (Nehemiah 8.7) Bowing your head is a lesser version, so to speak, of bowing with your whole body, of kneeling before the Lord, your Maker. It’s a sign of respect; it’s a way of showing honor; it’s an attitude of reverence; it’s a gesture that acknowledges God’s greatness, glory, power, might, majesty, *et cetera*.

I’m not sure we teach that very well to our kids. I recall a Sunday School teacher giving instructions on how to pray: fold your hands, close your eyes, bow your head – as if that’s the *only* way to pray (which it’s not). You don’t have to fold your hands, and you don’t have to close your eyes, and you don’t even have to bow your head – you can pray with your arms out wide, looking up at the heavens, if you want to. There’s nothing wrong with that, and there may be times when that’s useful.

But there’s something about that *bowing down* that’s significant, something about that *kneeling* that’s important, something that maybe we miss if – on the one hand – we never do it, or if – on the other hand – if we turn it into a ritual. That Episcopal church I went to as a kid, and all sorts of other similar churches out there that have a pew rail and designated times in the worship service when you get down on your knees on that rail – that’s a ritual. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that.

What we seem to have is a group of churches (like ours) where the congregants *never* kneel (at least, not in public worship), and a group of churches (like that Episcopal one) where the congregants *always* kneel at designated times. So people come to worship and they either kneel or they don’t, depending on the custom of the church. *Where’s the spontaneity?* All the examples I’ve lifted up from the scriptures are cases in which people are *spontaneously moved* to get down on their knees in response to what God *has done, is doing, or is about to do*. Moses, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Joshua, Job – in *every single case*, the kneeling was spontaneous. It wasn’t planned. There was no script people were following. They saw God *mightily at work*, and they *humbled themselves* before the Lord, their Maker. Why? *Because they recognized that they were in the presence of God*, and they were profoundly moved.

My favorite example is in the book of Acts. A Roman Centurion, Cornelius, has received a vision of an angel, telling him to invite Peter to come to his home. When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls at Peter's feet and worships him. Peter tells him to get up. "I'm just a man!" (Acts 10.26) It's a case of mistaken identity. Cornelius could tell that God was powerfully at work, but didn't quite realize that Peter wasn't God. Cornelius rightly recognized that he was in the presence of God, and made a perfectly appropriate (and spontaneous!) response. He just didn't have the object of his reverence quite right!

There's something *personal* here. When people *bow down* in the scriptures, it's because on an individual level, in their *own heart*, they recognize God's presence and power. The kneeling is instinctual. It's a way of saying, "You're *GOD!!!*" You can't institutionalize that and guarantee that *everyone* is going to have a personal, powerful experience of Almighty God. You can go to a church where people kneel every week. That doesn't necessarily mean that people are having a personal, powerful experience of Almighty God. These things can't be prescribed; they can't be scripted. When someone feels genuinely *moved* to get down on their knees, that's *personal*. And it's *powerful*.

I worry sometimes that we – "we" collectively, the church writ large – that we have turned worship into a program. A performance. A *very structured thing*. It starts at a certain time, it ends at a certain time (more or less), we'll tell you when to stand up, sit down, sing, pray, listen – it's all very structured. Structure can be very useful; I'm not saying we shouldn't have some structure in our worship. But do we also allow room for the spontaneous? *If somebody attending worship here in this sanctuary felt moved at some point during the service to get down on their knees – to kneel – to bow down before the Lord – would it be okay? Would everybody look at that person? Would that person be the subject of conversation at coffee hour or in the parking lot? (Not that we have a parking lot, but you know what I mean!) Do we allow people to worship God as God moves them?*

I need to tell you: I did not expect that this was where this sermon was going to land today. When I was looking at the calendar and seeing that today was Christ the King Sunday, and I was thinking (and praying) about what I might preach on today, I did not expect that we were going to end up here. Even when I had decided to focus on Psalm 95 and had come up with the title, "Bow Down and Worship," I did not expect that I was going to end up essentially offering all of you *blanket permission* to get down on your knees here anytime you feel so inclined. But something happened as I started looking at the scriptures. *God moved me*. I had been *here*; God moved me *there* ... and now here we are.

So what are we going to do now? Should we install rails in every pew? Should we institutionalize kneeling in our worship services? I don't think that's the answer.

Maybe it's simply this: maybe we need to allow the Spirit to move people. If somebody feels moved to kneel, to bow down before the Lord your Maker, *at any point*, today or next week or six years from now ... go ahead and kneel. Everybody else ... let 'em kneel, respecting the reality that God still moves, still motivates people to bow down, honoring his greatness, glory, power, might, and majesty.

It's worship. It's *personal*. It's our response to the majesty of God, and our King, Jesus Christ.

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