

**"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

**Philemon 1:3**

**SERMON THEME: "Worship As God Sees It"**

**SERMON TEXT: Jeremiah 29:11-14a** (Read first)

**Dear People of God,**

**A very devout Christian man was concerned that his congregation seemed to be marking time—no real forward motion, and a lack of spontaneous joy and celebration. So he prayed, "Lord, is it just me, or is there something else wrong? Show me how we should be as a worshiping people." True to His Word, that when the righteous pray for help, the Lord heard and answered. The sabbath day came. As the man prepared to go to the house of the Lord, an angel appeared. "Come with me", he said. "Let me be your guide today..."**

**As they entered God's house, it was as though the man could see from an elevated position. Nearly every pew was occupied, but there was something strange about it all. He saw the organist move his fingers over the keys, but no music came from the pipes. The choir rose to sing, their lips moved, but not a sound was heard. He saw the hymnals open, and the pages being turned, and the pastor obviously leading the service. But not a single sound was produced. It appeared the congregation joined in confession of sin, and followed a liturgy, then sang a hymn, but not a word was heard. Then the pastor stepped into the pulpit and went through all the motions of preaching, but the man and the angel heard nothing. No open Bibles were visible. Even with heads bowed in what must have been prayer time, they heard not a word. So the man turned to his angel guide with a puzzled look and said, "What does this mean? I see the service being held, but I hear nothing."**

**The angel responded, "You hear nothing because there is nothing to be heard. Now you see this service as God sees it. These people are *not putting their hearts into worship*, and God only listens to that which comes from the heart, and not just from the lips."**

**While the angel and the man were speaking, they were inter-**

rupted by the voice of a small child saying, "Our Father which art in heaven..." With a look of joy the angel said, "Now you are hearing what God is listening for, a prayer that is coming from the heart! This little one has put her mind and soul into her prayer; she means what she prays for, and believes God will answer! The Father in heaven hears only words of worship that come from a heart that loves Him, one who is eager to hear His holy Word and has every intention of doing what He says!" Now the man was beginning to understand. Do we?

We are reminded of David's words in Psalm 34, "The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous, and His ears toward their cry... When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears" (vv. 15-17). Who are the righteous? Those who have a living faith, not a dead one. Those who are faithful to their baptismal vow and worship in spirit and truth. Those who love the Lord with all of their heart, mind and soul. Those who love God's Word and depend on it! The righteous actively work for the Lord, members of His body, the church, using the talents God has given them to carry on Christ's mission. God listens to those who give of themselves, who sacrifice, making the work and worship of the one, true God their life's priority. He hears those who are constant in prayer, who call upon their Lord at all times, trusting He hears and answers. The righteous are sinners converted to saints, committing themselves 100% to following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, striving to be like Him, and in all ways giving glory to the heavenly Father!

Such as these God will hear when they worship! The voice of every born again believer in Jesus Christ who obeys His commandments is a pleasant sound to the ears of our Lord! Only those cleansed of sin can expect to approach the throne of grace and receive the manifold blessings God promises to the faithful! John in his gospel wrote plainly, "We know that God does not listen to (impenitent) sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God *and does His will*, God listens to him" (9:31). All of us here today should know what God commands, and certainly all of us have access to the Scriptures which both show us how to live, and light the pathway to heaven through the Gospel!

All of us are able to follow the example Jesus set for every human being, loving God above all and our neighbor as much as

ourselves. Scripture does not recognize excuses; God's directive is simply to do as He tells us to. By the power of the Holy Spirit He enables us to carry out His will to the end that not only our own souls are saved, but that we are able to lead someone else into the loving arms of Jesus as well!

Jeremiah's mission, like Isaiah's, was to call Judah, or the Southern Kingdom, to repentance. Both spelled out the sins of the Hebrew nation, leaving no doubt about their need to repent and turn back to the only true God. Like today, some of the people were worshiping false gods, some none at all, and some were guilty of ritual worship. God told them through Isaiah, "I have had enough of burnt offerings... Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly... When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease to do evil" (Isaiah 1:11-16).

The people were coming to worship on the Sabbath and festival days. They were bringing sacrificial offerings. They were praying. They were doing all the law required for worship. But God hated it all; none of it was acceptable. They were the likes of the kind of worshipers viewed by the angel and the man.

Why? Because their hearts were not in it! They were not willing to stop sinning! They were just going through the motions. They were following the letter of the law rather than the spirit of it. They were, in effect, depending on their good works to save them rather than love for God and faith in His promises. "They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged", Isaiah wrote (1:4). Had the angel taken us over their worship, we would not have heard a sound, because it was worship from the lips, NOT worship from the heart!

We have a God who knows what's in our hearts. He knows if we are just putting in our time, or if we're sincere when we come here. He sees hit and miss worship. He is omniscient, all-knowing. Scripture tells us this: "For the LORD sees not as man

sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). "The LORD searches all hearts, and understands every plan and thought" (1 Chronicles 28:9). "I am He who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve" (Revelation 2:23).

When we come to worship, God knows why—whether we come simply out of obedience to a law, OR because we really love Him and want to be near Him and hear His Word—whether we come because we feel we have to, OR because we *want* to! He knows when our prayers are sincere, when we sing with true joy, when we confess our sins from a truly penitent heart. He is fully aware of our intent when we leave His house, whether we intend to go home and forget the lessons of the day, or really strive to do what we've been moved and equipped by the Spirit to do. "Worship As God Sees It" may be quite different than the kind of worship found in some Christian churches today. This is where self-examination comes in. The Lord knows which hearts are contrite and pure, so we do well to ask ourselves why we are here; what has motivated us? Is our personal worship acceptable to our God? Is it truly a loving response to the grace of our heavenly Father, His love, His willingness to forgive, His gift of a Son who has given His life that we might live?

Our Lutheran way of worship does present us with a challenge. When the liturgy is the same or similar each week we can get so used to it that we can recite it almost without thinking. The same goes for anything we do that is repetitive. So we need to be aware that the devil will take advantage and try to get us to speak or sing words without involving the heart. Do our minds wander during the service or sermon? Are we communing because we feel the need to partake of Christ's body and blood given and shed for the remission of our sins? The Lord knows when we're not concentrating, when we're anxious for the worship hour to end so we can get on with things that satisfy the flesh. The 3<sup>rd</sup> command was "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy", not sabbath hour. It all comes down to whether or not our worship proceeds from the depths of our hearts!

Jeremiah's preaching was to the point, calling the people to repentance, and spelling out the consequences if they didn't. But he also made sure they heard the LORD's words of hope and

promise. Thus our text: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD, "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear you. You will seek Me and find Me; when you seek Me with your whole heart..." God's promise of hope and a future was dependent on the people turning back to Him in love and faith, committing their way completely to Him.

When their hearts were right with Him, THEN He would hear them and make good on His promises. Nothing has changed. When a sinner's heart is cleansed of sin through a living faith in Jesus Christ, and sincere repentance, God promises to hear! Then one's worship is acceptable to Him. Then He hears and answers prayer! When we worship from the depths of our inner being we can be assured our worship is acceptable; our prayers are heard; our confession is met with forgiveness; our sacrificial giving is blessed, and our lives enriched daily by God's boundless grace!

We may not be the congregation visited by the angel and the man in our opening illustration. But each of us needs to strive at all times to worship from the heart, to avoid lip service and vain confessions, prayers and singing. Worldly cares need to give way to a craving for God's Word; our love should be vibrant, and our faith alive! Words of absolution following our confession of sin, followed by communing with Christ Jesus, should move us to new heights of joy and thanksgiving! In all that we do in the house of the Lord our aim should be to glorify our Father in heaven! And when we leave here, we strive to be more like Jesus in our daily walk than when we came in! "Worship As God Sees It" is for every day, not just this one day of the week.

Hopefully, in this sacred hour we can all testify from the heart with the psalmist, "Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and shield. Yea, our heart is glad in Him, because we trust in His holy name. Let Thy steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in Thee" (Psalm 33:20-22). In Jesus' name, Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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