

**Faith and Worship in a Skeptical World**  
(sermon by Craig E. Tenke, March 10, 2002)

In today's scripture lesson, a man blind from birth sees! Miracle of Miracles! What do all the people do? Do they celebrate? Do they praise God?

Some say, "This is clearly the work of God."

But others say, "This man is not from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath."

The learned authorities are sharply divided about how to interpret just what happened and how to respond to it. These aren't bad people. They're faithful men who carefully keep God's commandments. The inquiry begins.

-The cured man is uncomfortable, at first answering only concrete questions.

-The man's neighbors say, maybe it's not really him, after all.

-The man's family doesn't want to get involved.

While this is going on, we see another, more subtle miracle. Even as he is examined by the authorities and forced to explain his own direct experience, over and over and over again, the man's faith and his witness grows. In the end, he says, "Lord, I believe." He worships Jesus.

What are faith and worship all about, anyway? Genesis indicates that we are made in the image of God, yet the ten commandments caution us against idolatry. In the New Testament, the life and ministry of Jesus embodies our most treasured values, the traits of compassion, self-sacrifice and love. Yet it isn't the flesh, or even the humanness of Christ that we worship. What is it that we worship? In what do we rest our faith?

The Gospel of John says,

"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." - *John 4:21*

I'm an elder and a scientist. I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm a skeptic about most things in life. God made me a scientist, regardless of what I chose to do with my talents. I question everything. My innate questioning can't be turned on and off like a faucet. Recently, though, I've come to realize that the same is true of my faith. Even while I was unaware, it guided me and strengthened me. It draws from the spiritual nurturance provided by my family, a family which has always included this congregation. Many of you guided and supported me throughout my education as well, often in intangible ways that you never knew. After my successful defense of my doctoral dissertation, a European colleague was a bit puzzled by the visible presence of church people and prayer at my celebration. To him, the integration of rural Protestant traditions into an urbane, international academic world was a uniquely American curiosity, perplexing, in a quaint sort of way.

Sometimes I feel like a kind of liaison between the worlds of science and faith. Throughout my studies and work as a scientist, my identity has been defined by hard empirical evidence. Through the years, I've had plenty of conversations about my religion with interested and curious coworkers. Most of these conversations have focused less on faith than on other issues near and dear to Presbyterians: our *very* American history, our government, our continuous efforts at balancing social justice issues with Tradition, and our mutual forbearance and diversity of thought and conscience. Our endless debate over ordination standards has made for many animated conversations. Faith, however, is much harder to talk about.

To a scientist engaged in basic research, knowledge is its own reward. Yet the real nature of science is something quite different. Science is a process, an empirical engine called the scientific method. Questions are phrased, tested, and rephrased. No answer is final, although the process itself will not give a consistent answer when the theories, hypotheses or methods are wrong. Yet Science cannot exist if there is no room for error. Scientists question, doubt, rephrase and recombine. We question our own findings and methods, as well those of other authorities. Science also has an often overlooked rule that no hard-nosed scientist would dare go against: It's called the "Law of Parsimony": Never use a complicated explanation if a simpler one will do.

In my field, we study changes that occur with psychopathology in the way the brain processes information. Specifically, we look at the pattern of the electrical activity produced by the brain as an individual is engaged in perceptual or mental tasks. The earliest waves are quite similar across individuals, and map in a very sensible fashion onto the anatomy and basic neurophysiology of the sensory systems. The later ones shift and stray as a result of the demands of the task, as well as from various other things that we try to control for experimentally. Sometimes we see effects with text-book clarity. At other times, we have considerably less confidence that an effect or difference is reliable. Because of this variability, our techniques require precise statistical models, in addition to the physical and physiological ones. What is really there, and what is just noise? Is there another way that we can look at the data that will sharpen the differences? If we're confident in the electrophysiological findings, are we equally confident that the clinical classifications are appropriate and adequately matched?

Within a system that's built on the universal mistrust of anything that isn't continuously supported by empirical testing, where's the room for God? Where's the room for faith? Where's the room for worship? A particularly skeptical colleague of mine, who consistently confuses the words "religious" with "ignorant" or "superstitious" is quick to assert his belief that science and faith are mutually exclusive. While I don't particularly enjoy sidetracking productive workdays, I sometimes feel obliged to explain that while I don't believe in a big person sitting in a cloud, I do believe in God.

You see, faith and worship aren't science. However, they also don't compete with science. While Science asks "What is it?" and "How does it work?" faith asks, "Why" and "What is our place in it all?" Science and faith are complementary ways of viewing the universe, different mechanisms for evaluating the same data in different ways. While the scientific method disassembles life and the universe according to simple objective rules, faith pulls all the pieces together to give them value and make them subjectively real. Faith is holistic, the ground on which the detailed figures of science may be written.

To me, the archetype of worship is the experience of watching the sun rise over the ocean - The awestruck wonder, the feeling of connectedness, of thankfulness, that truly energizes the soul. Somehow our brains were built to perceive this higher level of experience and order, and to incorporate ourselves into it. As much as we were built to take things apart, to test, to simplify, we were also built to worship. In a sense, we're like single cells, acknowledging and submitting to the needs of the body. People of faith can recognize such experiences of joy, adoration, connectedness and thankfulness as worship. Vocal atheists enjoy it, but then verbalize it until it's gone. "It's just nature," they say. Others may miss out on it altogether.

"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

As Christians, we recognize that our connection to God does not end with our own personal experience, even one as powerful as a peak experience at the ocean or in the wilderness. Whatever we do, we are aware that we are also inextricably connected to the greater family of man. Our worship services are communal, a fellowship of the faithful. Just as we are awed by nature, we're likewise in awe of Christ. Particularly during this season of Lent, and most saliently during Holy Week, we confront the full magnitude and meaning of sacrifice and redemption. Despite our own inabilities and petty humanness, we're humbled by our acceptance, by our belonging, by the Grace of God.

Six months ago, I sat in my car on the way to work and ignored the unremarkable skyline of Manhattan on an unremarkable September morning. I was unaware that in mere moments we would all be stunned by images and experiences of evil and good, more stark, more concrete, more overwhelming than a civilized mind could possibly bear. In mere moments, our bond to each other became palpable, our bond to God implicit. Many who never knew that they needed it flocked into our houses of worship. Some came to mourn. Some came to meditate and pray. Some came for guidance. Some came out of respect for others. Many came to share a common loss, and to contribute to the common spiritual gain. They came for the comfort of belonging, of faith, of worship. And, at least for a little while, we could all unashamedly say, "God Bless America."

In our skeptical world, we truly know that our faith will guide us through even the darkest places.

**Scripture Reading**

**John.9: 1- 41**

**Hymns**

**“Morning Has Broken”**

**B# 469**

**“Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee”**

**B# 464**

**“The Lord’s My Shepherd”**

**M# 104 (1<sup>st</sup>)**

**“I Danced in the Morning”**

**B# 302**