

Worship: More Than a Show

(What follows is the second in a series of messages called Shark Church: What the Church Can Learn From Sharks.)

Matthew 28:1-9

I remember seeing a movie as a kid that confused me. I grew up in an era of tough guys—of Starsky and Hutch, John Wayne and Dragnet. Our male heroes moved through crimefighting—and through life—as if nothing could bother them...no one could boss them around. The movie that threw everything sideways for me was Captain Blood, one of the great Errol Flynn pirate movies.

The story was set in the late 17th century, when Britain was about to change royal families...not without some conflict. Captain Blood found himself on the wrong end of the political intrigue and became a pirate. Throughout the film he was heroic, aggressively independent, and totally in charge—until he comes face to face with his rightful King. When they meet, Captain Blood falls to his knees, bows his head and asks for orders, completely submitting to his lord and master.

It looked so strange to me.

You know our text today as one of the Easter stories, but it's too good a passage to only focus on once a year.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

Picture that story for yourself. The disciples and the women who were faithful followers of

Jesus have been through a lot up to this point. They followed Jesus around for three years, went with him to Jerusalem and saw him arrested and beaten and killed, and now they've seen him resurrected and returned to them. And then, just as soon as things were getting back to whatever normal looked like for them, Jesus was about to leave again. But before that the women have an encounter with Jesus on Easter Sunday. They recognize him and fall to their knees. They clasp his feet and express their love for him. It's a powerful moment of intimate worship.

So we're in a series called Shark Church. Let's review some of the shark facts we learned last week. A shark is an amazing natural machine.

Some sharks lose up to 30,000 teeth in their lifetime.

The largest living shark in the world, the whale shark, can grow up to 50ft. long.

A shark can smell a few drops of blood from a mile away.

Some fisherman say the mako shark can swim up to 60mph.

A shark is basically a muscle with teeth—it rarely gets tired or takes any rest. In fact, a shark spends its entire life doing three things:

It swims, it eats, and it makes baby sharks.

A shark that is true to its nature simply swims, eats, and reproduces. We learned last week that a shark never stops growing during its entire life-cycle. That's an important part of what sharks can teach us.

Over the past three years, to start the year, we've talked about what it means to be the church. The church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

If you're going to memorize one sentence over the next four Sundays, make it this one:

A faithful church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

So last week we started to explore our theme for these next few Sundays: Faithful churches are like sharks.

I'll say that again: A church that is true to its nature—a church that is faithful to its calling—is like a shark.

It never stops moving. It seeks out nourishment. And it makes new disciples. A faithful church never stops growing during its lifetime—that's one for us to chew on.

The Discovery Channel offers a Shark Week—seven days devoted to programs about shark behavior, shark bites—all shark all the time. We're offering a Shark Month—a look at what the church can learn from sharks.

So if a church that is true to its nature is like a shark, then what's the church's nature? It is the church's God-given nature to be built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

So last week we talked about fellowship. What about worship? My *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines worship this way: 'Worship is the act of adoring and praising God, that is, ascribing worth to God as the one who deserves homage and service.'

In that sense worship isn't limited to what happens here on Sundays. Worship happens anytime we offer praises to God—anytime we remember or share the fact that God is God and we're not—worship happens whenever we serve each other and the world out of gratitude for what God has done for us.

But for many of us we think of worship as simply the service of worship we attend each Sunday.

Soren Kierkegaard recognized 150 years ago that there was a problem with that. He saw congregations coming to worship for the show. They sat still while the professionals—the minister and the choir—worshipped on their behalf. I know this may stray into the eye-glazing zone of theological detail, but this was a central issue of the Reformation. Protestants protested—literally—against the idea that only a priest could approach God, and that the average church member needed that priest to worship for them. The

Protestant tradition is partly built on the idea of the 'priesthood of all believers'—where every individual can encounter God for themselves in prayer, confession and worship.

Kierkegaard criticized the idea of the professionals doing the performing, with God as the prompter and the congregation as the audience. He said that true Christian worship had the congregation as the performers, the minister and choir as the prompters, and God as the audience. In Kierkegaard's eyes worship was active, not passive—it was a contact sport.

But what goes into good worship?

Jim Belcher's book, *Deep Church*, still challenges me in the way that I think about the answer to that question. Jim writes:

"Worship can be grouped into five acts: calling, cleansing, constitution, communion and commission. God calls us to worship, we recognize our need for cleansing, we hear him speak in his Word and sacrament, and then we are sent out to love God and serve others. Each act is dramatized by powerful singing and meaningful prayer. It should be a drama that rivals the best storytelling in Hollywood."

Given all that, it's tragic how often worship becomes a dividing point among Christians. We don't disagree as much about the elements of worship as we do about the methods or forms of worship. Strangely, it most often comes down to musical styles. And that's too bad, because arguing about style is an exercise in missing the point.

Last year Julie and I spent a week in Turkey with pastors from other international churches. We spent time walking around the ruins of ancient cities—it was an amazing tour through some of the places where the Christian church was born and grew.

The city of Ephesus was unforgettable. So much of the layout of the city has been restored—the main road through town, the amphitheatres, and the beautiful façade of the ancient public library. But a lot of the buildings had crumbled, too. As I looked through the chunks of columns laying around I noticed that many of them had holes that ran through the center of them—if you looked from the proper angle you could see long-ways through the columns, like through the barrel of a gun.

I asked our guide about that and he said that the original buildings—the ones that dated back 2000 years or more—had iron reinforcing through the center of the columns, and that that was what had made them so strong. But in the Middle Ages, the people in that area had forgotten how to make iron, and so they knocked down the ancient buildings and melted down the iron to make their tools.

That struck me as sad. Instead of figuring out how to make iron for themselves, medieval craftsman simply rested on the work of their ancestors.

The same thing happens in churches.

Instead of testing and experimenting with our own creativity to develop meaningful ways to worship God, we trot out the work of past churches and use their innovations as our own. That's not what we're supposed to be about. In our churches we don't want to forget how to create—to build new things in new ways. We don't want simply to mine the work of those who came before us. That's a short route to staleness, dullness and darkness.

Because the point of worship isn't simply playing and singing what we like. The point of worship is to get us into a place where we drop to our knees and offer praises to God—where we fall and—just like the women did in our text this morning—where we fall and clasp the feet of Jesus and worship him.

If 18th century choral music gets you there, then great. If the repetitive praise choruses of the 70s get you there, you have my blessing. If Gregorian chants or modern rock or the sound of popcorn popping gets you there, then have at it.

Because the issue isn't what gets you there. The issue is getting '*there*' somehow. And what does that look like?

What does 'there' look like?

Worship is all those things we heard in the definition from my Pocket Dictionary, but it's more than that. Worship is intimately connected to the mission of the church. Bryan Chappel is the president of Covenant Seminary in Missouri, wrote this about the role of worship in the church.

“Our worship should be an intentional expression of [our mission to share the gospel]. Love for Christ compels us always to consider how we may present and re-present the gospel so as to bring the most glory to God and the most good to his people...Unless we make the communication of the gospel the frame and focus of our worship, our ceremonies possess only a form of godliness—without the power of God.”

So if the communication of the gospel is the ‘frame and focus’ of our worship, why is the music so important? How does music help us worship?

For that we can get a little help by coming back to some new shark facts. A few years ago some German scientists were trying to encourage sharks to mate in captivity. They tried everything (though I’m not sure what that means: dinner? wine? a romantic movie?). They couldn’t get anything, er, going, and so they turned to a trick that had been working in zoos with land animals for years—they played music.

Along the way they learned that some songs worked better than others at revving up the sharks. Some of the songs that worked best were Joe Cocker’s ‘You Can Leave Your Hat On’, and Justin Timberlake’s ‘Rock Your Body’. I’m serious here. Some songs had no effect, but others got the sharks a little frisky. Some songs got the sharks in a place where they could be true to a central part of their nature.

I’m guessing that no one in church (or anywhere else) has ever asked you this, but here goes:

What style of worship makes you frisky for God?

Not the ones that make you feel comfortable or safe or that are familiar. Which ones remind you of your love for God? Which ones draw you into a sense of connection and closeness with your savior? Which ones get you in a place where you want to kneel before God and clasp his feet and worship him with reckless abandon?

The answer to that question matters. Why?

Because this is more than a show. This is more than simply being entertained and comfortable. This is more than a show. This is our worship response to the gifts God has given us. I’m not talking about financial resources or big houses or safe lives. God calls us

to worship for his deeper, more fundamental gifts: life itself, forgiveness through Christ, the calling on each of our lives to participate in the Kingdom of God.

When the disciples and the women in our text recognized who Jesus was, they bowed down and worshiped him. They didn't do it because it was familiar or a part of their tradition. They didn't do it because it was comfortable. They did because of who Jesus was—they did it because of what Jesus had offered them in his ministry and death and resurrection.

When a church is true to its nature—when it moves ahead and feeds itself and makes new disciples—when it is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ and expressed through fellowship and worship and discipleship and mission—when a church is true to its nature, people will recognize that Jesus the Messiah is here—we're be reminded of who he is and what he offers to each one of us.

And then we'll worship—individually and as a community of faith—the gospel of Jesus Christ will be the frame and focus of everything we do. We'll worship in spirit and in truth and with all our heart and mind and strength.

Shark Month continues next week with Discipleship. Let's pray together.