

I love ritual, especially in Worship. Rituals are a way for us to commune with God. I love rituals because I grew up in a church that didn't have rituals. We sang, prayed, gave our tithes, and listened to the hell and brimstone preacher, but that was the extent of the rituals in the service. I felt more like an observer, not a participant. I was watching someone else worship, and so it became easy to tune out and go through the motions. Attending worship was just that – attending -- not truly worshipping. And worship became a check box for Sunday. I was guilty of offering empty worship.

Now that I design worship, I always pull from that experience, and I want people to have every opportunity to participate in worship. We don't just attend worship here. We come to worship the Lord our God. Rituals are one way to do that. Lighting candles to symbolize Christ's presence, communion, baptism, reading liturgy and scripture, singing the doxology, and praying the Lord's prayer together, are just some of the rituals we participate in together.

But, even rituals can make us get comfortable, tune out, and go through the motions. A ritual that became commonplace for the Hebrew people was animal sacrifice. They brought animals to sacrifice as part of their worship and to receive atonement, at-one-ment with God. This psalm talks about how they were going through the motions too. They made their sacrifices to be cleansed of their sins, but then would go back to living their sinful lives.

Their worship was not transforming them into living the way God called them to live. One pastor shared that after she completed a sermon series on the meaning

of holy communion, the congregation was so moved that they asked if they could take the elements every week instead of once a month. The pastor was happy that the spirit moved them in this way, and for months they participated in holy communion every Sunday. But, after a couple of months, the pastor noticed that the people were treating communion as a cleansing agent, or as a "free pass" to sin. Throughout the week, they treated each other harshly, but then they got a clean slate each Sunday. They were guilty of offering empty worship because their hearts were never transformed. Communion had become an empty ritual because they were using it for the wrong reasons.

This psalm is a warning about empty worship and ungodly living because all God wants from us is heart-felt worship and to keep our promises that we made when we entered into covenant with God. Now, we don't get all this from the selected verses of the psalm that is in the lectionary. Half the psalm is left out in our corporate reading. So, let us take a closer look at the entire psalm. [Read & talk about the psalm, line by line.]

The people's sacrifices became empty because they had forgotten about God in their daily lives. They didn't keep their covenant by living a transformed life. They thought if they just went through the motions of their worship rituals, it was enough, that they were worshipping and being cleansed of their sin.

But, God doesn't want empty worship or sinful living because that separates us from God. God calls to us, speaks to us, gathers us to Godself, so that we can be in covenant, in relationship. All

God asks of us is to do our part in maintaining the covenant, which is offering heart-felt worship and a sacrifice of thanksgiving. That means, we ready our hearts when we enter into God's presence and we bring God gratitude.

A sacrifice, or offering, of thanksgiving is being grateful for all that God has done for us. Being grateful that God speaks to us, that God calls for us, that God reaches out for us and gathers us in. We're truly grateful because we know we don't deserve it. That's how great God is and why we should be grateful.

When we give thanks, our hearts surrender and acknowledge that God is active in our lives. God doesn't want us going through the motions. God doesn't want us to make worship a checkbox. God doesn't want us to attend worship. God wants us to worship, because we are maintaining our relationship, we are communing with God, when we do. When we offer true, heart-felt worship, we are on the path of right living and we keep our covenant with God.

This morning Kyle publicly made a covenant with God, that reflected an inner covenant he made long before. We also renewed our covenants with God this morning. So, let us leave this place knowing that we are in covenant with God and our lives throughout the week should reflect that covenant. Let us offer our praise and thanksgiving to God through our closing song.