

Worship...

in “The Great Adaptation”

by Paul W. Chilcote, PhD

I recently heard a new description for these unprecedented times in which we are living: “The Great Adaptation.” That label emerges from one of the central questions for a time such as this: What within each of us must adapt for the good of all? If we are fighting a battle against a virus as a human family, we are also fighting a more ancient battle against inherent selfishness. Without question, the living of these days has pushed us to think deeply about our understanding of God, faith, relationships, and worship. **What does God say to us about our worship during this time of “sheltering in place?”** Moreover, given the fact that worship is both God’s revelation to us and our response to God, how does our response honor the God we worship? In the midst of this great adaptation, we have an opportunity to bear witness, in unprecedented ways, to the way of Jesus.

This is not the first time, of course, that people of faith have been called to respond to desperate circumstances. Two stories that have some parallels to our own time come immediately to my mind. In the summer of 1987 my family and I visited “Anne Frank’s House” in Amsterdam. It was a particularly chilling experience to make our way into the “secret annex” in which Anne’s family sheltered in place, hiding from the Nazis for fear of their lives. In subsequent reflections on that whole experience, and as a pastor, I asked myself, “How did they worship?” Despite the fact that they were separated physically from other Jewish families and their rabbi,

they experienced God’s presence in that place. They lifted up their hearts in prayer. They quietly sang the Psalms. **They worshiped God in the context of their family, small in numbers, but powerful in terms of intimacy, solidarity, and effect.**

Similarly, a Methodist pastor in Latin America and some of his parishioners found themselves in prison on an Easter Sunday morning during a period of horrendous oppression. Many within their community had been killed and many of them feared for their own lives. Despite the fact that they had no provisions for a celebration of Holy Communion, they sang resurrection hymns together, prayed, and the pastor led them through the

liturgy. When it came time to consecrate the elements, he elevated his empty hands and said: “The bread which we do not have today is a reminder of those who are hungry, for those who are oppressed, and for those who yearn for the provision that only God can give.” Likewise, he took a virtual cup in his hands, and said: “The wine which we do not have today is a reminder of those who, with Jesus, have shed their blood for the sake of righteousness. Through their sacrifice, they join with Jesus in witness to the triumph of God’s love over all those forces that seek to destroy life.”

I believe we can carry two important lessons away from these stories of adaptation in which the defense of life was paramount. First, **worship gathers together the family of God, but the intimacy of our own families**

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can lead to profound encounters with God. Under duress, the family becomes that place potentially in which God's presence, provision, and protection become real. Secondly, **the "absences" we experience in life teach us important lessons about what really matters.** How appropriate, for the Christian community, that this great adaptation has come in the midst of the Lenten season. Just as that Latin American celebrant found it necessary to say, "the elements we do not have..." we can now say, "the fellowship, the face-to-face connections, the physical presence we do not have today..." We are given the opportunity to more deeply appreciate what our connectionalism really means, how important our relationships with one another are, and even the significance of unity-in-diversity in a world polarized by less significant concerns.

In addition to these two stories, engaging three questions can help us navigate this adaptive time. What is authentic worship? How do we avoid "testing God" in this moment? Where can we best model agape – genuine, selfless love for others?

Authenticity. Perhaps no text comes more directly to the central point of authentic worship than John 4:24: **"God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."** Here the apostle describes the "integrity of worship" at its most profound and simple level. The great adaptation teaches us anew that worship is not about style, worship space, or even direct human contact with others (as significant as this is); rather, it is about encountering God in spirit and truth. In the present moment—in the safety and security of our homes, like Anne Frank—we bring the totality of our lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the God of love.

Faithfulness. I grew up in a family that believed truths never conflict with the Truth. I developed a profound appreciation, therefore, for the truths of science and the amazing benefits all people derive from them. **To pit faith against science, particularly in a situation like ours today, can lead to disastrous consequences.** In South Korea, a secretive Christian sect in Daegu became the epicenter of the virus because this fringe group refused to cooperate in efforts to eradicate COVID19. Closer to home, some businesses and even some United Methodist churches have continued to conduct business as usual and to meet for corporate worship against the instructions of church and civic leaders. In the case of one defiant congregation, several members are now in

local ICU units fighting for their lives. For us to "pack the churches on Easter" would not be a beautiful thing; it would be an unhealthy and irresponsible act putting innocent people at risk unnecessarily. It would signal our having succumbed to the temptation of putting God to the test (see Exod 17 and Luke 4).

Discipleship. This leads directly to the third question related to where we can model genuine, selfless love under the circumstances. **Jesus calls us to pay special attention to and care for the vulnerable, the elderly, and those who are particularly compromised by the virus.** While the vast majority of us will suffer little from the Coronavirus, others will lose their lives. In light of this, bravado with regard to our faith (God's protection) and positing the false choice between life and economic security (human avarice) do not reflect the way of Jesus. Worshiping God entails our commitment to a life of selfless love and God's vision of beloved community for all.

It feels very counterintuitive, therefore, but **to separate ourselves from one another temporarily is our most profound act of worship.** To worship God in spirit and in truth means to worship with those closest to us as we shelter in place during the great adaptation. We will come through this. God is not punishing us, nor will God ever abandon us. "We know that all things work together for good," St. Paul reminds us, "for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). Think about all our precautions as acts of love and true worship. To paraphrase James, "Religion or worship that is pure and undefiled is this: to care for the most vulnerable and protect oneself and others from the virus" (James 1:27). To adapt the United Methodist Morning Prayer of Thanksgiving accordingly:

New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors – by complying with social distancing and by worshiping safely in the security of our own homes—and to devote each day to your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.



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