



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

## Called to Worship

SCRIPTURE:  
Acts 4:32-35

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April 7, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Anna Owens

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I can vividly remember how I felt as we read the story. I was in 3rd or 4th grade, and we were reading a short story about a little boy whose dreams, somehow, came to life—danced above his head while he slept—and everyone could see them. I can't remember the name of the book now or all the details but I remember what I felt. There's a term for it. Secondhand embarrassment. It's the reason I can't watch the movie, "Meet the Parents." Younger, cooler people than I am would call it "cringe." It's the feeling you get when you're embarrassed on behalf of someone else.

In the story, the little boy whose dreams come to life is ostracized from his community. For some reason I think maybe he lived in a jungle. This boy eventually goes to sleep outside, far away from his home and village, but the villagers can still see his dreams. He was mortified and I was mortified for him. Can you imagine? Someone being able to see your innermost thoughts? Those things in your subconscious that only come to life when you're asleep? No thank you. Eventually, because it's a children's book, there's a good lesson learned from this little boy's dreams. They save the village, or save a family, or something. (I've scoured the internet for this book and can't find it, so if anyone knows what I'm talking about and can confirm that it's not just a fever dream of mine, let me know after the service). And the people realize they never should have made fun of this little boy or sent him away. They realized that his dreams were a gift for them all.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is storytelling that redefines all storytelling. It reinvents the genre. This is necessary, in large part, because the events of Easter Sunday redefine history. The resurrection of Jesus Christ reinvents the very notion of history itself. History was once static. It described events that happened. The future was static in the

same way—things that were to come, in the future, not yet realized. The work of Jesus—his life, his death, his resurrection—merge and blend the two. The past informs the present which is now infused with the future. God's kingdom, not yet realized, has come. Pieces of it are here, even now. What once was prophesied dances before our very eyes. Dreams, once hidden, come to life.

Today we kick off a new sermon series called, "The Ways We Worship." As pastors we're often asked, "What makes us, as Presbyterians, different from Methodists or Baptists or nondenominational communities?" The way we worship is a large part of the answer. And it really doesn't have anything to do with the style of worship. At Village Church, we have four worship services on a Sunday and three distinct styles of worship. There is, of course, the high church, high liturgy, traditional Sunday morning service in the Sanctuary of the Mission Campus. Morning worship at the Antioch Campus is highly liturgical and leans traditional, but in a very relaxed and casual atmosphere. And, of course, the 5 p.m. Gathering service at the Mission Campus is fully contemporary. Each of these services, however, is ordered in a specific way, and that's what this series is about: How we order ourselves when we come together to worship the living God.

All of our worship centers around the Word of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of God's Word is central to all of our services. Everything we do before the Word is considered preparation for hearing God's Word, and everything we do after the proclamation of the Word is considered a response to the Word. Our bulletins even indicate as much.

Some elements are more fluid than others. At Mission, the pastoral prayer is part of the preparation for hearing God's Word. At Antioch, it's a response to hearing God's Word. Baptisms are technically a

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response to God's Word so they should come after the sermon, but we often place them earlier in the service to help our families who may have squirmy or tired or hungry babies. You'd be surprised how many worship services fall squarely in the middle of morning naptime. Other elements always appear in roughly the same place.

Tonight, we're talking about the Call to Worship. Where is the Call to Worship in a service? The beginning. A Call to Worship can be responsive, like it is at Antioch or it can function more like an invocation—with a pastor or liturgist inviting the congregation into a posture of worship. At the Gathering, the Call to Worship is typically a discussion question where neighbors talk to one another for a few minutes before moving on to the next part of the service.

In our Scripture lesson this evening, we find the disciples figuring out what it means to be the church. According to Luke, who is also the author of Acts, the community was of one heart and soul. No one claimed private ownership over anything. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and there was not a needy person among them, because they laid everything they had at the apostles feet and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This, perhaps, seems like an unattainably high standard. They were of one heart and soul? No one claimed ownership over any possessions? There was not a needy person among them? That sounds great for them, but impossible for us. I'm not convinced that the early church was as utopic as passages like this make it seem, nor am I sure that it's the point.

Remember, the Book of Acts redefines storytelling. It bridges past and present and future into a hybrid reality in which the kingdom of God is both now and not-yet. Unlike the gospel narratives, whose main character is Jesus, the Book of Acts tells a story without a human protagonist. It's not the disciples. It's not Peter or Paul. It's not even the early church. The main character of the Book of Acts is the Holy Spirit, let loose on the world. And boy, is she wild.

God's Spirit in the Book of Acts is playful and joyous and free. God's Spirit is the wind that blows the disciples to places they'd rather avoid. God's Spirit is the force that compels hundreds and thousands to join the Way of Jesus Christ in those first few months

and years after the resurrection. God's Spirit is what dances like flame on the heads of the disciples on Pentecost—God's dream, come to life, for all to see.

Last week, Rodger proclaimed the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and reminded us that it is the heart of Jesus Christ that beats in our chests. Acts teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit which binds our hearts together in unity and in grace, for the sake of the whole world, which God loves so very much.

God loves this world so much that God still wants to be a part of it—physically, viscerally. Theologian and scholar Willie James Jennings says that we get too preoccupied with the economic arrangements of the early church, especially with passages like this one. Perhaps this is, in part, Luke's fault. His gospel talks more about money than any other. Jennings says this, "Too often in our reading of this story our view is clouded by the spectacular giving and we miss the spectacular joining."

God seeks—in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, indeed in the whole witness of Scripture—to create common life that is radically different than whatever powers rule the day. The early church is a case study in God's great experiment and hope for the world. It is a joining of Jews and Gentiles, both of whom must give up important parts of their identity and culture and customs to belong to this brand new community—God's dream come to life. This is one aspect of the spectacular joining that happens in the early church, laid out in the Book of Acts. Another is that people from across economic backgrounds come together, so that those with little and those with a lot and all those in between will have what they need—no more and no less. Yes, there is spectacular giving present, but what's perhaps even more earth-shattering is this joining in a society built to divide people along lines of class, wealth and status.

The Book of Acts also tell us a story of a God who just can't stay away. This is the third part of the spectacular joining—God's continued joining with us. The Book of Acts is not a blueprint for how to live together as the church as much as it's an invitation to join in the ongoing work of the Spirit. A reminder that the past and the present and the future are all now—that we inherit a tradition of wonder and fear and hope and hardship and grace upon grace upon grace.

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The Call to Worship may not feel like the most monumental thing we do in worship on a Sunday. It's short. It's right at the beginning. You probably forget about it by the time you walk out of the door at the end of the service. But to stand here, to stand up with those others gathered alongside you and say, "I'm here to worship the living God, to bear witness to God's Spirit in my life and in the life of the world," my friends, that's not just monumental, it's a proclamation that the revolution is here and that you are a part of it.

We call ourselves to worship to remind ourselves that worship is precisely what we are called to do. That everything—every breath, every moment, every joy and every heartache—all of it happens in and with and through the Spirit of the living God, poured out for the whole world. We call ourselves to worship to proclaim to the world that we gather from all backgrounds for a common purpose, in the face of all that would divide us. We call ourselves to worship

because we are a part of God's dream for the world, come to life, realized through and by the power of the Holy Spirit, who dances even now above our heads, who makes God's dream visible to all.

So we may not be ashamed when people look to us and see our dreams, God's dream, visible above our heads. May we be inspired by it. May we be liberated by it. May we look around each week when we gather and give thanks to God for those drawn by the Spirit to be here, to proclaim God's goodness and love for their lives and for the sake of the world. May we remember that what God started on Easter Sunday did not end on Easter Monday, and that we as an Easter people bear witness to that truth with our very lives. May we rejoice that we've been invited into the storytelling, that our gathering together helps to rewrite the future even as it unfolds before our very eyes. And may it be so for the life of the church. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.