

EUTYCHUS**The Six Signs Series: Worship****Bruce Davis****St. Andrew's United Methodist Church****Omaha, Nebraska****October 21/22, 2017**

I was in New York City in August, taking in games at Yankee Stadium and CitiField, part of a tour of new east coast ball parks, including Atlanta, Washington D.C. and Marlins Park in Miami. I spent three nights at an old tourist hotel off Times Square, next door to one of the oldest venues in the Theatre District: the Lyceum.

On my one off-night of the six day trip, I bought a cheap ticket to the show next door, "The Play That Goes Wrong." Per the upside down marquee, pretty much everything that can go wrong in live theatre does. Sets collapse, actors forget their lines, the story itself goes far afield—not unlike some sermons I've preached, I suppose.

At one level, what we do in these hours, on this platform, is "live theatre," a new show premiering every weekend, and there are a lot of things that go wrong, particularly when you've got as many moving parts as are involved in a St. Andrew's worship hour.

Happily, nothing in these hours (so far) has gone as entirely wrong as the worship experience recorded in the 20th chapter of the Book of Acts. The foremost apostle to the Gentiles, Paul of Tarsus, is in the port city of Troas in Asia Minor, on the return leg of what's remembered as his Third Missionary Journey.

Reading from the Book:

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight.

There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead.

Bummer! Contemplating what was just read, thinking on what went wrong, it occurs to me Paul might have spent a little less time talking and more time singing. Not wanting to make that mistake today, I thought I'd share a little song.

From the days of John and Charles Wesley in 18th century England, music has been a central component in the Methodist worship experience. The brothers themselves are credited with thousands of titles. What you're about to hear is not among them. "Methodist Pie" dates from the Camp Meeting experience of the American frontier. When we get to the chorus, you'll see a parenthetical echo; I hope you'll sing that part. If you don't, I'll likely stop and remind you. These hours are not intended as spectator sport....

Went down to the camp meeting, the other afternoon
 For to hear them shout and sing
 For to tell each other how to love one another
 And to make the hallelujahs ring
 There was old Uncle Daniel and his brother Ebenezer
 Uncle Rufus and his lame gal Sue
 Aunt Polly and Melinda and old Mother Bender
 Oh, you never saw a happier crew

O little children (little children)
 I believe (I believe)
 O little children (little children)
 I believe (I believe)
 O little children (little children)
 I believe
 I'm Methodist till I die

**I'm a Methodist, Methodist is my belief
 I'm a Methodist till I die
 Till old grim death comes knocking at my door
 I'm a Methodist till I die**

**Well they all go there just to have a big time
 And to eat their grub so sly
 Have applesauce butter and sugar in the gourd
 And a great big Methodist pie
 Well, you ought to hear them ringing
 when they all get to singing
 The good old bye and bye
 See Jimmy McGee in the top of the tree
 Saying, 'how is this for high?'**

**O little children (little children)
 I believe (I believe)
 O little children (little children)
 I believe (I believe)
 O little children (little children)
 I believe
 I'm Methodist till I die**

**I'm a Methodist, Methodist is my belief
 I'm a Methodist till I die
 Till old grim death comes knocking at my door
 I'm a Methodist till I die**

**Then they all join hands and dance around a ring
 Just a singing all the while
 You'd think it was a cyclone coming through the air
 You could hear shout half a mile
 Then a bell rings loud and a great big crowd
 Breaks ranks and up they fly
 While I took hold of the sugar in the gourd
 And I cleaned up the Methodist Pie**

O little children (little children)
 I believe (I believe)
 O little children (little children)
 I believe (I believe)
 O little children (little children)
 I believe
 I'm Methodist till I die

I'm a Methodist, Methodist is my belief
 I'm a Methodist till I die
 Till old grim death comes knocking at my door
 I'm a Methodist till I die

That's friends, is **PASSIONATE WORSHIP**, per the Robert Schnase book serving as our model for this series. Robert Schnase was, for a brief time, my bishop in Missouri. The way the Methodist appointive system works, before Nebraska Bishop Ann B. Sherer-Simpson could talk with the Rev. Nancy Davis and me about coming to St. Andrew's, she had to first clear it with Robert Schnase. Schnase had come to know me just well enough that he was quick to sign off.

Let's look closer at Acts 20, starting at verse 7, "*On the first day of the week...*" Let us not forget: Pretty much everyone involved at the ground level of the Jesus movement was a Jew. Jesus was a Jew, the varsity apostles were all Jews, Paul was a Jew. Per the Book of Genesis, after six days of creating, the Lord God rested on the seventh; so also should the Hebrews set aside the 7th day as a Sabbath to the Lord.

However. Jesus, having been crucified on a Friday, was in the tomb over the Passover Sabbath, then raised on the first day of the week. Therefore, the Jesus people would observe their Sabbath on the Day of Resurrection: Sunday.

Many of their fellow children of Abraham seem to have taken this as an affront to deeply held religious traditions and values, provoking no small amount of pushback--at times turning downright violent. In Acts 18, Paul is brought before the tribunal in Ephesus: "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law"—as in the Law of Moses.

Lest we think too poorly of these Jews, resistance to change in worship is by no means an ancient phenomena. How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? **WHAT DO YOU MEAN, CHANGE?** Speaking of change...

I came of age at a time Sunday morning in America was still largely set aside for church. Those days are long past. Sunday morning is about fun runs and youth sports. One of the primo reasons for putting together a Saturday evening service here at St. Andrew's was to give Youth Sports and Fun Run folks another worship option. While the Saturday evening service has done real well, we haven't necessarily seen a lot of children and youth. It is what it is...

It has not escaped my notice that the primo pagan deity of the Old Testament is Baal. I defer to no one when it comes to sports appreciation, but Balls such as this have become the jealous gods of our time, demanding obeisance.

And there are implications beyond the impact on the church. It seems to me, sometimes, that America is on the edge of a collective nervous breakdown—if not over the edge, already. Such would not surprise the folks in the Bible. Regardless of whether they were observing their Sabbath on the 7th day or 1st, they might well point to non-stop 24/7 culture as a root of a lot of what ills us.

Sayeth Jesus himself, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) Which is to say, the Sabbath is intended as a gift of well-being for our souls... Like any gift, we can receive it with joy—or not.

One last thing before moving on: I saw one of these internet polls this very morning: “Which of these October weekend activities is best: Watching football. Going to a pumpkin patch. Getting fall house/yard work done.” While all these are swell, do you notice anything missing there?

Moving on...

“When we met to break bread...”—as in sharing the Lord’s Supper, I suppose. Let us quickly note that a New Testament communion seems to have varied considerably from what modern-era Methodists are accustomed to, more resembling a carry-in supper, maybe finished off with a slice of Methodist Pie.

Love feasts, these were called. Not that there weren’t problems with this model, as addressed in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. If any think division in the church is a new phenomena, I invite you to read Paul’s epistles to the church in Corinth, a congregation divided along lines of personality, doctrine and class, where even the Lord’s Supper had become a point of contention.

In contrast to a traditional Methodist pot-luck, where folks bring in casseroles and such, put these on a long table and everyone digs in, in Corinth, everyone ate out of their own personal picnic basket. The folks who had a lot to eat gathered in their little corner of the room, largely ignoring those who had little if anything.

Paul was appalled. Anything that created divisions in the church appalled Paul—and nothing appalled Paul more than that the Lord’s Supper itself should be a source of selfish division: “When you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse... Do you not show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” Better not to come to church at all than act like this...

Of course, being Methodists, we have a method for the Lord’s Supper, observed on the first weekend of every month. One of my favorite parts of being a United Methodist is that I can invite any and all persons to partake.

I became sensitive to this back in high school. My primo girlfriend was Gilda Kay Watson. Gilda was a year ahead of me in school, one day short of two calendar years older than myself—a reversal of the guy/gal norm in that time and place. I think she kind of dug going out with about the closest thing Warren County had to a rock and roll star--and who knows what might have become of the relationship, had not Gilda been a staunch Roman Catholic. I remember one night we were out looking at the stars, her musing, “Isn’t a shame there are so many divisions in the church?” Thought to myself, “Wow. We’re having an ecumenical breakthrough.” Only to have her continue, “Don’t you wish everyone was a Roman Catholic?”

Anyway, the RCs of Warrenton, Missouri, had a Saturday evening service. I’d occasionally attend with Gilda, her always reminded me that I was NOT to take communion. The table was reserved for those in the one true church. I thought that was pretty uncool. Not that it restrained my ardor for Gilda Watson. It was surely in everyone’s best interest that when she went away to college, Gilda was wooed by and then wed a fellow RC.

It pleases me to think that if Gilda Watson were to come St. Andrew’s, for whatever reason, on a communion weekend. I could invite her, along with Lutherans, Baptists, non-denominationalists, nones, to the table. Whatever your story, I can invite you. That’s important to me.

The open table is a foretaste of the life of the world to come. Per the song, I’ll be a Methodist ‘till I die, but when I die, I’ll be joined to the heavenly chorus, all of God’s people singing in one voice, “Holy! Holy! Holy!”

Jumping ahead to verse 8: *“There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting”*—indicating the room was stuffy, perhaps explaining why young Eutychus was sitting in an open window in the first place.

I am reminded of worship hours at Civil Bend United Methodist, one of the five churches on the Pattonsburg Circuit in rural Northwest Missouri. The one room church was heated by an upright coal stove in the back of the sanctuary. An old guy named Andrew Carneige regularly sat next to the stove, given to shout “Amen!”—which initially kind of freaked me out, but could serve as a helpful wake-up when the place got stuffy from the heat of the stove...

It’s been a long time since I le worship in a room with a coal stove; most of the stuffiness I’ve experienced since has been from stuffy church folks.... Not at St. Andrew’s, of course...

Old Joke: Preacher’s in the middle of the sermon, when a congregant all of a sudden has a heart attack. 911 is dialed, folks are told to remain in their pews until the ambulance arrives. Paramedics enter the sanctuary and go through half the congregation before they identify the one who’s actually dead.

Of course, ask most any preacher, they’ll tell you about the experience of dying up here, congregants nodding off, otherwise checking out. The issue has only been exacerbated by the shortening of America’s collective attention span.

I assume that’s one of the reasons St. Andrew’s wired this room for multi-media worship, building screens into the walls. Cool! If Paul had had Power Point, Eutychus might have remained engaged, rather than falling out the window.

Sharing the Gospel in this room has been such a joy for me. Along with the built-in screens, I also noticed this in our initial visit to St. Andrew’s. Everything up here was moveable. Consider the possibilities.

Back to Acts 20: This “*room upstairs*” is interesting. New Testament congregations didn’t have spaces like this, no church “buildings” of any kind; rather they met in homes and such. The gathering place in Troas certainly seems to have been substantial--a three story dwelling, perhaps looking something like this. We assume the owner had opened his or her heart and home to the believers.

Last weekend, we kicked-off this BEE THE CHURCH series with a focus on Faith Formation through small group ministries. Throw in a plug here for our newly-forming Men's Ministry, still in the organizational stages. If you'd like to get in on the ground floor, the guys will be breaking bread following the 10:00 service next Sunday.

As heard last weekend, we're inviting Saints of Andrew to host small groups organized around mutual interest. If the model, ripped from Acts 20, interests you, stop by the Adult Ministries desk in the Rotunda, for more information.

As noted, Bishop Ruben Saenz will be preaching here next weekend. At Annual Conference this year, Bishop Saenz spoke to the critical importance of small group ministries and I would not be at all surprised if he takes up the theme with us.

Now to my point of personal passion: Having long counted preaching as Job 1 in my ministry, what most interests me about Acts 20 is the detail that Paul, having started talking, kept on talking, into the midnight hour and beyond, stopping only when young Eutychus nodded off and took a three-story fall out the window.

People will occasionally take me to task for working from a manuscript. Preaching "without notes" is all the thing these days. Friends, this manuscript is for your protection. If I don't have a manuscript in front of me, I am liable to go into free flow and we could be here a long time...

Throw this in: There is reason to believe Paul was not a particularly dynamic speaker. Having endured my own share of homiletical critics over the years (everybody's got an opinion), I find it comforting to remember that Paul himself was not immune. Congregants in the aforementioned Corinth seem to have been particularly harsh, "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.'"

I can identify. I've found myself at times wishing I could just write the sermons, rather than having to get up front of folks and preach them. I'm a plodder when it comes to sermon preparation, plugging away six mornings a week at Panera's. That's the easy part. The hard part is, well, this....

GO INTO HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD, LIGHT PIANO

I've spent forty years living in the tension identified in two pieces of literature. The first, from Sinclair Lewis' 1927 novel, "Elmer Gantry." We meet the title character as a young ne're do well. Hoping to find a respectable line of work, Elmer enrolls in seminary. One of the older students, Harry Zenz, launches into a rant, directed toward his fellow seminaries:

We're wonders. We admit it. And people actually sit and listen to us, and don't choke. I suppose they're overwhelmed by our nerve! And we have to have nerve, or we'd never dare to stand in a pulpit again. We'd quit, and pray God to forgive us for having stood up there and pretended that we represent God, and that we can explain what we ourselves say are unexplainable mysteries.

Amen to that. Any thinking preacher who hasn't struggled with the absurdity of trying to "represent God" isn't a preacher I want to hear, much less be....

But there's also this, Paul writing to the church in Rome:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scriptures says, 'No one who believes in him shall be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Paul shared a generous gospel, offering salvation to all who would receive it. Here's the rub:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written (Isaiah 52), 'How beautiful are feet of those who bring Good news!' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

Full disclosure: No one ever accused me of having pretty feet. But forty-three years ago and counting, I got the idea I might be led to preach. Having said, "Here I am, Lord, I'll give it a shot," I've been plugging away ever since.

I would have never dreamed of being in a ministry like this; goodness, congregations such as St. Andrew's didn't exist in 1974. Nevertheless, I can echo the faith of Paul, as shared with the aforementioned church in Corinth:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain....

That said, Harry Zenz is always somewhere in my consciousness, as is this passage from Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 31:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Robert Schnase uses the term "Passionate Worship." Others in the same vein "Heart-Warming Worship." This is my aim: "Authentic Worship."

Will you sing with me...

**The splendor of the King
Clothed in majesty
Let all the earth rejoice
All the earth rejoice
He wraps Himself in light
And darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice
And trembles at His voice**

**How great is our God
Sing with me
How great is our God
And all will see how great
How great is our God**

Nancy saw our BEE THE CHURCH theme, and asked how much I actually know about bees. Not much.

Given that we'd been through a big campaign this spring with PROJECT ZERO, there was a general consensus that we wanted to go soft-sell this fall. I will occasionally check in to see what's going on in some of my former congregations and found University Church in St. Louis using this eye tag line: 'Be You. Be Loved. Belong.' Tossed that around with some of the staff, who generally liked it, but suggested we simplify it to 'Be The Church.'

It doesn't take much to spin me into word association. AJ Baratta was in the room; what if we put AJ in a costume and make it BEE THE CHURCH? Amidst great groans, AJ googled in Bee Costume and came up with several to choose from. I liked this one, but got voted down. Folks liked this one, but it was going to cost \$150; with a capital campaign going on, we're trying to watch our expenses on the operating side.

So, this, of course, is what we decided on, listing out at \$25 + shipping. The glasses may have added another \$10....

Anyway, Nancy, who knows a lot more about a lot of things than I do, went to telling me about bees. Did I know that bees exist to serve the queen? I did not. Furthermore, when the queen dies, so does the hive itself.

It occurred to me that this is pretty much the faith of the scripture, per our relationship with the Creator King. Reading from the Hebrew hymnbook, Psalm 84:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the court of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

For the Lord is a sun and shield;
He bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you!

It is faith of the contemporary song:

And age to age He stands
And time is in His hands
Beginning and the End
Beginning and the End
The Godhead three in one
Father Spirit Son
The Lion and the Lamb
The Lion and the Lamb

How great is our God
Sing with me
How great is our God
And all will see how great
How great is our God

It concerns me mightily that the human hive of our time and place is deciding we don't much need the King anymore. How's that working out?

When we left Acts 20, Eutychus had taken a three-story free fall. We are relieved to read:

But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.'

Bringing us to my favorite part....

Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

Which is to say, crisis having passed, Paul went back to preaching...

**Name above all names
Worthy of all praise
My heart will sing
How great is our God**

Pretty much everything that could go wrong had. It was my first Sunday in the Pattonsburg pulpit. I'd never preached a sermon before, anywhere in my life. To this day, I talk fast when I'm nervous and I was very nervous that morning. A message that had timed out at fifteen minutes in front of the bathroom mirror, came in at only 7. The entire service was over in under a half hour.

All things told, I would have preferred to bolt out the back door, but I girded my loins to shake hands at the back of the sanctuary. It does take a lot nerve to do this job. And I remember this old farmer named Auldrige Morris coming through, giving me a robust handshake, looking straight in the eyes, saying, "That was a wonderful message, Brother Bruce."

I knew it wasn't, of course, but a little encouragement goes a long way, and I was back the next weekend, as was Auldridge, saying again on the way out, "That was a wonderful message, Brother Bruce."

It took me about a year to catch on that Auldridge Morris was hard of hearing. For a time, then, I sort of dismissed his weekly affirmation. But then it occurred to me that Auldridge was hearing through grace healed ears and they were wonderful messages to him.

So when you hear a preacher or an anthem or a prayer, here or somewhere else, and want so sit there and grade, consider first, what kind of heart did I bring with me this morning?

Borrowing from C.S. Lewis:

You are not here to verify, Instruct yourself,
or inform curiosity, Or carry report.
You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid

Keep praying, Okay?

How great is our God
Sing with me
How great is our God
And all will see how great
How great is our God (REPEAT)

Benediction
Live, Laugh, Love

