

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B
A Service of CandleMass
May 3, 2015

A number of years ago, I was a new priest in a congregation. It was an exciting time getting to know a new people, city, and church. At coffee hour, about a month in, I noticed someone looking at me. You know the feeling when someone is staring and wants to speak with you. This was a boy about five or six, named Dawson. He clearly had something to say and was working up the courage to say it.

All our interactions, until that point, had been at worship. He saw me up in the pulpit preaching, behind the High Altar presiding, or while he was kneeling at the rail to receive communion. Everything in that building was elevated to be more visible. He always was looking up at me, usually from a distance.

The boy walked from the cheese plate to the cookies slowly making his way across the parish hall until he stood nearby just behind his father. I introduced myself and said, "Hello Dawson." The first thing he said was this... "You know, Father Jensen, you're much shorter in person." You're much shorter in person. Seriously? Dawson is in high school now and looks down at me.

I've thought about what he said many times since then. It always makes me smile but there are two important points to learn from it. First, Church should never be about any *one* person. Our purpose as a Church is always to point to what God is doing in the world and in your lives, not to ourselves. Worship helps reorient us to God and our neighbors – or at least it should. That leads to the second point.

Our church building and our worship are beautiful but can create unintentional barriers among people. Barriers of space, of language, of music, among others. I say all this as I purposefully stand several steps above you not to be better – but to be better seen and heard. To the little boy, I *was* far away and up there, removed from what he knew.

What we are attempting to do in this new service of Candlemass is to create a worship experience that is beautiful, intimate, and pushes the boundaries a bit. The name itself is a play on words of a feast day called Candlemas. It is in the evening with candles and is a mass or Eucharist. We are writing new prayers that are inclusive and, hopefully, elegant.

We chose this space in the choir to worship because it is intimate, beautiful, and most people only spend a few moments here on Sunday morning. It is oriented in the traditional style of a monastery in which monks sit across from one another singing and praying back and forth with one another to God.

Tonight, this is an experiment. It is the main worship experience for most people because of the marathon. It is intentionally familiar yet suggestive of or pointing to what it will be like. Worship is never a performance; it is always prayer. Everything we do, when offered to God, can be a form of prayer. You can't mess up, just offer your best – or at least that is what I always tell myself. Participate as much or as little as you like. It's new for all of us.

I quite vividly remember my first time in worship at an Episcopal church while in college. I had no idea what was going on with all the sitting, standing, and kneeling. All the songs, they called hymns, were unfamiliar. They used words I had only read in books yet called it their contemporary form. I was totally lost, both in the form and in the beauty of it. So I went back.

On the second visit, a kind lady showed me how to juggle the books so I could follow along. The worship was beautiful and was also a tool to shape and form us deeper in faith. She taught me that we pray what we believe. If you want to know *what* Episcopalians believe, look at *how* and *what* they pray. She was ancient, probably 50 years old, but that made sense. And she always called me “dear.”

On the many follow up visits there, we sat next to each other. On one occasion, I asked why the priest sometimes faced us and other times turned his back on us. It seemed rude. Dear, she said, When the priest speaks to the people on behalf of God, he or she faces the people. When the priest speaks to God on behalf of the people leading our prayers, he or she faces in the same direction as the people. We’re all the same when we talk to God.

We know that God is not “up there” or behind the wall. The posture of prayer redirects or reorients us to be mindful of God’s presence. One direction is not better than the other but sometimes one is more helpful than the other. Orient means to the east, dear. I knew that one.

Worship is telling the good news of Jesus with an invitation to participate in that sacred story and make it our own. When we tell the story we pray it with our whole bodies. When we sit, stand, or kneel. With our ears in hearing the readings or music. With our voices in singing and praying. Through our eyes taking in the windows, stone, and people or closing them to focus in prayer. Through the smells of candlewax, old prayer books, oiled wood, or even incense. We pray through touch in the Peace, in the sprinkling of holy water as a reminder of baptism, and in receiving the sacrament.

All we do *in here* in worship reorients us to be mindful to take it *out there*. We point to God acting in the world and in our lives so God does not seem distant and removed- to recognize the holy is always present.