



BREAKING THE MARBLE SPELL

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For the last couple of years, DaVinci has been getting all the media attention, with the books and the movies and exhibits. But he had nothing on that other Renaissance man, Michelangelo. Michelangelo was one of the great visionaries of his time. It's stunning to think that the same person who carved The David statue also painted the Sistine Chapel and designed St. Peter's Basilica. Any one of those achievements would have earned him a place in history, but to have accomplished all three is truly amazing.

You've probably heard that when he was asked how he carved his statues, he said he just carved away everything that wasn't the statue. I always thought that was an urban legend, but I checked it out. It turns out that several times throughout his life, he made comments to that effect. He wrote a poem once, talking about carving as "breaking the marble spell" and releasing the statue trapped inside the stone.

As romantic and idealistic as that sounds, Michelangelo was also incredibly practical about bringing his visions to life. He once said, "If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem wonderful at all."

He knew that setting those statues free from the marble required tools of the trade. The only way to show the world what he could see in the stone was by doing the hard work of carving and chipping away. That's why he said, "It is well with me only when I have a chisel in my hand."

When he was in his later years, one of his contemporaries watched him at work and wrote this description:

I have seen Michelangelo, although more than sixty years old and no longer among the most robust, knock off more chips of a very hard marble in a quarter of an hour than three young stone carvers could have done in three or four, an almost incredible thing to one who has not seen it; and I thought the whole work would fall to pieces because he moved with such impetuosity and fury, knocking to the floor large chunks three and four fingers thick with a single blow so precisely aimed that if he had gone even minimally further than necessary, he risked losing it all.

Michelangelo the visionary was also Michelangelo the craftsman. He became so proficient at using his tools that he could shape the marble the way he wanted and achieve the picture in his head.

Last week, we talked about the New Day vision, which is,

To build a worshipping community of all kinds of people that will be a living testimony to the power of the gospel and the reality of God's kingdom.

We said that a vision is a picture of what we want to be, but aren't yet. That's the statue in the marble. It takes tools to break the marble spell, to see that vision become a reality.

That's where the New Day values come into play. Again, to help us have a shared understanding of the words we're using, I would define values this way:

Values

Deeply held convictions that shape our actions and attitudes.

Values are the chisels. They're the tools we have in our hands to shape our attitudes and actions as we seek to reach the vision in front of us.

When New Day was first started, we identified 7 core values that we wanted to define us. They aren't the only values we have as a church, but they are 7 markers that we believe are an important part of who we want to be. Over the next several weeks we'll look at each of these in more depth, but just so you'll know where we're going, here they all are at once:

1. Worship is central.
2. Truth must be well-told.
3. The church is a mission outpost.
4. Every Christian is a minister.
5. Authenticity rules the day.
6. The church must lead the way in love & reconciliation.
7. The Who question outranks the How question.

Every month, as the board meets, we begin by reviewing our vision and values. We then try to make our decisions in light of who we are wanting to become as a church. We let these values become the chisels that shape how we go about making decisions.

These are great individual values as well as for us as a group. We've prepared these bookmarks for you to keep in your Bible or someplace else. Hopefully every once in a while, you can refer to them for yourself and reflect on how they intersect with your own life and the choices you make.

At the top of the list is one we touched on briefly last week, which is this:

Worship is central.

That sounds basic enough. But as I mentioned last Sunday, it's easy for a church to lose focus and get caught up in doing all kinds of other things – good things, but secondary things. Our prime directive is to worship God, and we wanted that to be stated in no uncertain terms.

When we say worship is central, we don't just mean the handful of songs we sing here each week that we call worship songs, although that's an important part of our experience. We don't even mean the entire worship service. It's a bigger word, a word that has far reaching implications.

I like the way author Mark Labberton put it: "Waking up is the dangerous act of worship. It's dangerous because worship is meant to produce lives fully attentive to reality as God sees it, and that's more than most of us want to deal with."

That's a good description – waking up. Having our eyes opened. Worship is about seeing who God is and seeing reality the way he sees it. When that happens, it can't help but change the way we function in the world.

But it raises all kinds of questions. Just what does it mean to worship? What does it look like? How do we keep it central?

I always relate to concepts better when they're communicated through a story. There's one in the book of Exodus that gives us a fascinating look at life in the Israelite community when they were camping out in the wilderness. The story does more than just give us a slice of life, though. It provides some valuable insights about how we can keep worship central at New Day.

Exodus 33:7-11

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.

When Karin and I lived in California, we attended a church that completely and radically changed how we both thought about worship. It wasn't a perfect place by any means, but something was going on there that was very unique. Both Karin and I spent our entire childhood in church, so we knew a lot about worship. But this was really the first place where it came alive for both of us. Week after week, in one service after the other, the only way I can describe it is that we became aware of God's presence on a level I never had before. I'm not talking about an emotional reaction – I mean a sense of awe that was unmistakable. God was in the house and wouldn't be ignored.

That was 17 years ago. It was a profound, life altering time. But I have to say that in the years since then, I've rarely had similar experiences. That time didn't end up making me a better worshipper. I find I still struggle to keep my thoughts focused on God for long periods of time. You would think that after having that kind of experience, it would be no problem to stay connected to the reality of God and his power. But my heart still tends to fall away from what I know to be true. Like the words of that song, I'm prone to leave the God I love.

This is something the Israelites wrestled with constantly. Just prior to the passage we read, Moses had been up on Mt. Sinai, getting the 10 commandments from God. The people knew that's where he was. They saw God's glory come down like a fire on the mountain. But even while Moses was on the mountain, their attention drifted and they made themselves an idol. These people had seen God do one miracle after another and they still couldn't keep their attention on God. Their hearts fell away from what they knew to be true.

God was angry. Moses was angry. God was ready to be through with them. The people apologized and Moses stepped in and talked to God on their behalf. But Moses knew that in light of recent events, having a place for God inside the community would be dangerous for the people. The community had gotten so far off track that God's holiness might destroy them. So he wisely set up the tent outside the camp to provide some separation. As the quote said earlier, worship is a dangerous act because we as imperfect people are coming in contact with a perfect God.

John Ortberg summed up this kind of recognition by saying, "It is the knee-buckling, jaw-dropping acknowledgment of the gap between the creature and the Creator, the finite and the Infinite, the sinful and the Holy."

There was this gulf between God and the people. The physical distance of the tent from the camp symbolized the spiritual distance between God and the Israelites. Moses was their go-between, meeting with God for them outside the camp.

Worship of a holy God by less than holy people takes a mediator. And that's exactly what Christ does for us. In fact, the author of the book of Hebrews writes this:

Hebrews 13:12-13

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp...

I may never be a good worshipper. I can beat myself up over and over for the fact that I'm lousy at remembering God. I can try harder and harder and do everything in my power to get better. But ultimately, what I need is someone who is good at it to do it for me.

The cross is that place outside the camp where Jesus did business for us with God. He continues to be the one to represent us to God. He is our worship leader. His attention

never shifts. When he is carrying our worship to the Father, it is always accepted because Jesus loves his Father completely and pleases him in every way.

That's why so much of what we do and say here revolves around Jesus and what he did on the cross. That's why we end our prayers by saying "In Jesus' name." It's a small way to recognize that we only come to God through him.

The world is full of people trying desperately to be good enough worshippers: Catholic pilgrims climbing steps on their knees. A Buddhist priest who went on a 1,000 day run through the mountains. Muslims making the trip to Mecca. Mormon boys going on their two year missions. Jehovah's Witnesses knocking on hundreds of doors. Pentecostal worshippers hoping to be slain in the spirit. All these people wanting to worship right, trying to generate the right emotion, trying to punish themselves or demonstrate strong devotion. It's admirable and I am often humbled by their commitment. But even that is not enough. Our worship will always need a mediator. Thank God we have one in Christ.

Moses gave us a picture of the role Christ plays for us. What I love about this story is the way it shows how the people entered in and participated, even though Moses was the one interfacing with God. Even with Christ as our mediator, we participate fully in worship. It just takes on a different character than when we're muscling through it, trying to get it right.

I see 4 principles from this story that can help us in our desire to keep worship central. Let's go back and read through it more slowly to find them.

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting."

We've already pointed out that Moses set up the tent outside the camp to distance the Lord's presence from the sins of the people. But he still went to the trouble of setting up the tent anyway. He didn't scrap the idea of worship because the people were unworthy. He put in the effort to

Make some space

We generally operate on the assumption that if a group of Christians get together, worship will automatically happen. We don't say it like that, but we can go through all the motions of a service, get to the end and say "We worshipped God today," when in our hearts, we didn't truly become more aware of God or wake up to him in any way.. Just because we say the words or go through the rituals doesn't mean we're worshipping or giving God our full attention.

But that meeting tent didn't just set up itself. Somebody had to carry it out of town. Somebody had to find a flat piece of land. Somebody had to set it up and pound the stakes in the hard ground under the hot sun.

Worship requires intentionality. It takes prep work -- carving some space in our hearts and minds for God. It may look different for each of us but it carries the common theme of being intentional.

When Pastor Bill Hybels was trying to do that in his own life, somebody suggested that he start journaling. So he began to take time to write a page a day, and a page of prayers a day. It changed his life and helped him concentrate on God more.

Many of you have heard of Brother Lawrence and his little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He was a monk who lived back in the 1500s. I love two things about Brother Lawrence. First, he didn't like putting in the daily time of prayer and meditation that was required of him as a monk. His mind would wander, and by the time he was done he couldn't tell you what he had been meditating about. Now I can relate to that.

The second thing was that he didn't really care for his work. His job was in the kitchen, and he hated it. Most people I know have at one point or another had to do a job they didn't like and wondered why God put them there.

So Brother Lawrence that instead of doing his praying in his private room during the allotted time, he would pray on the job. And pretty soon, it completely changed his work.

Here's how he describes it: "At the beginning of my duties, I said to God with a son-like trust, 'My God, since you are with me, and since it is your will that I should apply my mind to these outward things, I pray that you will give me the grace to remain with You and keep company with you. But so that my work may be better, Lord, work with me; receive my work and possess all my affections.'

"Finally, during my work, I continued to speak to Him in a familiar way, offering him my little services, and asking for his grace. At the end of my work, I examined how I had done it, and if I found any good in it, I thanked God. If I noticed errors, I asked His forgiveness for them, and without becoming discouraged, I resolved to change and began anew to remain with God as if I had never strayed. So, by picking myself up after my falls, and by doing many little acts of faith and love, I came to a state in which it would be as difficult for me not to think of God as it had been difficult to accustom myself to thinking of Him at the beginning."

That's very practical. It's a totally different approach than Bill Hybels took, but no less intentional. However we choose to go about it in our own lives, we need to make some space for worship to happen, to set up a tent apart from where we normally focus our attention.

When Moses had set up his space, the writer tells us this:

Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp.

There's a wonderful openness to that line. Anybody could inquire of God. That word "inquire" means to seek out, particularly in worship and prayer. In addition to making space for worship, this story encourages us to

Expect to connect

Sometimes the way we inquire of God is the same way we would buy a lottery ticket. We think it would be nice if something happened, but the chances of getting what we want are pretty slim.

God would like us to come to him with a sense of expectation that we will actually encounter him. How would it change the way we worship if we genuinely anticipated that he would show up?

There are two basic components to inquiring of God: Posing questions and listening for answers. It's very simple. We ask God for what we need and then pay attention to see how he will respond.

Occasionally, you'll hear a sermon or read an article on worship that makes you feel a little guilty if you're always asking God for something. Requests aren't seen as part of worship. But I don't think that's a Biblical perspective. Posing questions and listening for answers are two of the best ways I know to recognize God.

Psalm 40:1-3

*I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.*

Notice how David went from seeking God, asking him for help to seeing his answers. It ends with him praising and worshipping God. God gave him a new reason to sing, all because David waited expectantly to connect with God.

I was talking with my brother-in-law this week. He and my sister-in-law had faced an agonizing decision between two job opportunities. Try as they might they couldn't come to any choice they felt peace about. Finally they cried out to God and said, "Lord, will you make this choice for us." Then they waited. Within days, they got a phone call: Funding for one of the positions had fallen through, and that offer was no longer on the table. It was a huge relief to see how God answered their request.

My brother-in-law said, "These situations really force you to lean on God, and then you find out that he's just as faithful as always." A crisis turned into an opportunity to sing a new song to God.

Are we really seeking God in our worship? Do we come expecting to meet him, to ask and be answered?

Anyone can inquire of the Lord. Christ opens the invitation to everybody. Revelation 22:17 says

Rev 22:17

Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

God wants us to enter worship expecting to connect with him, whether that's during our time together or our time alone.

The story in Exodus goes on to tell us more about what the people did when Moses visited the tent.

And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent.

In the TV show *Lost*, the survivors of a plane crash are trapped on this mysterious island. From time to time they encounter this entity that manifests itself as a pillar of cloud. Some of them are scared and run away from it, while others just stand and stare at it, totally transfixed.

That's as close as I can get to imagining what it was the Israelites saw – this phenomenon of a cloud in the shape of a pillar. And I'm sure it's nowhere near as mysterious and impressive. Think of it – not a low cloud or a plume of smoke – a big column of cloud hovering in one place.

From what we're told, it doesn't appear that the Israelites were instructed to watch it – they just couldn't take their eyes off it. It was a mesmerizing sight that captured their imagination. They were drawn to

Stand in the doorway

That's where this story says they worshipped. It was as they tried to take in the beauty and power of God that their hearts were realigned. They didn't see him directly, but they saw the evidence of his presence. It was compelling and fascinating and beautiful and scary and breath taking all at once.

What struck me about this scenario was how everyone positioned themselves to see God. You can just see all of them, leaving their cooking or laundry or wood chopping or

animal feeding and making their way to the door where they could have a good view of what was going on. They didn't leave their homes and go out in the desert. Each person did this individually on their own property.

Each of us has a place in our own lives, a doorway where we can choose to go to see God more clearly. For some of you, it's a painful circumstance that you'd rather not be too close to, but you can see God at work in it. Mother Theresa prayed, "May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in." She knew that contained within suffering was a chance to encounter God. Those circumstances may be where your eye is drawn to him.

The doorway isn't always suffering, though. Maybe right now you're celebrating a great joyful, beautiful gift that God has given you. Those gifts don't automatically translate into worship, but they give us an opening. C.S. Lewis once commented that we need to go beyond gratitude which says, "Thank you for the gift," and get to adoration that says, "What kind of God gives such gifts?" When we do that, we're positioning ourselves to worship.

Creation can be a doorway. Read Psalm 139 sometime and notice how David looks at the way his own body was made and marvels at the God who creates. One poet wrote:

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.*

Each of us has a doorway – That's all it is – a doorway, an opening where we can get a glimpse of heaven right in the middle of our own lives. It's up to us to stand in it. That's the place we have an opportunity to be mesmerized by God. We need to identify it and position ourselves close enough to God's activity where we will have a good view of him.

The writer tells us one more thing about what would happen when Moses went out to the tent:

The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.

Albert Einstein once said the single most important question we can ask is this:

Is the universe a friendly place?

That's the question to ask about God as well. Is he a friendly God? Is he knowable and relatable? The answer will change the character of our worship. Because we're not only asked to admire God off in heaven somewhere, we're invited to

Enter into a friendship

When the early Greek manuscripts of the Bible were first being discovered, scholars noticed that the Greek was different from the other classic literature of the day. It had a different grammar and style. So the scholars began to think that the writers of the Bible had come up with a special holy way of writing that was reserved exclusively for sacred Scripture. They thought it was a lofty, grand form for talking about God.

Then archaeologists began to discover more ancient Greek documents. Instead of literature, they were finding personal notes, things like grocery lists and business documents. And what they realized was that the Bible was written in street language. It was written the way people talked about ordinary, everyday things. It was the opposite of a holy style – it was completely down to earth.

When we start talking about worship, we can immediately go into some formal way of trying to talk to God: “Thou art beneficent and majestic, Oh Mighty and Sovereign One. I wouldst bestow upon Thee my most beauteous adulation.” We can fall into the trap of trying to be impressive in the way we talk about God, as if somehow the bigger the words or the lower we bow or the higher we raise our hands, the greater our praise will be.

There’s a foreign film made in Israel called Ushpizin, which is the Hebrew word for guests. In the movie, an Orthodox Jewish couple entertains some very unorthodox guests during a Jewish holiday. The husband and wife fight over it at first, then change their minds and decide to treat their guests with a new kindness and respect.

There’s one scene in the movie where the camera gives us a close up of the wife. She says, “I have to tell you: You’re sweet, righteous, beloved. I’m just crazy about you. You did it big time. You’ve given me another chance.”

You think she’s talking to her husband. Then the camera pulls back and you see no one else is near her. She’s having this conversation with God. And she says, “Father, I swear I’ll do anything not to let you down. Anything.”

That’s the kind of tenderness and intimacy in worship we’re invited to have. Friendship is knowing each other well. It’s sharing life together. It’s being real with one another. More than that, it is enjoying being together.

Friends keep you real. Friends are the people who help you be most yourself. Friends talk honestly, stick by each other. Again, it’s through our mediator, Jesus, that we can be so bold as to claim that kind of friendship. He’s the one who told his disciples,

John 15:15

I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

We get to enjoy God. That's friendship. And that's an important element of worship. Christian author John Piper struggled with the idea of wanting his own happiness and joy. He felt like somehow that was too selfish and that he should be more focused on just worshipping God and not his own desires. Then one day, he realized that maybe they were the same thing. He writes, "This was almost too good to be true – that my quest for joy and my duty to glorify God were not in conflict. Indeed they were one."

They are one. Our greatest joy is only found in friendship with the God we worship. That's why we were created. That's why this church exists.

Worship is central. As we seek to make that a visible reality, I would encourage you to consider the following:

1. Am I making space for worship? Am I intentionally finding ways to focus on God?

Jamie Owens Collins once said, "Public worshippers need to be private worshippers first." We can't rely on our church experiences to fill that need in our lives. What can I do this week to make more intentional room for worship in my own life? Buy a journal. Set the alarm on your watch and pray when it goes off. Be creative. Just be purposeful.

2. Am I expecting to connect? What am I seeking from God? Am I listening for a response as if I think I'll get one?

3. What's my doorway? What in my life could be a potential source for worship that I haven't explored?

4. Am I enjoying God like a friend? Jesus says he is one. How can I relate to him more on that level?