



ACT I

Entrance: Locating Ourselves

I knew I had been away from home too long. I was on a five-week jaunt with several preaching assignments in several locations. This morning I woke up in a strange room and couldn't remember where I was. The fog lifts slowly for me in the mornings. Add a couple of time zones, a different pillow, strange surroundings, and I've got a fog that almost won't lift. It took a few minutes before I could locate myself.

Knowing where we are is a major part of knowing what we are supposed to do. When I figured out where I was—a bed and breakfast in Marion, Ohio—I had a clue about my day.

The Entrance is Act I of the worship plot, the first in a series of connect-the-dots that leads us into the Story of God. Some label this act the call to worship; others, the invocation. Like the exposition of a play, the Entrance locates us in time and space.

The entrance of a home, a building, or a room usually tells you where you are. A locator—a street sign, an address number, or a room number—is normally nearby. People who are looking for a place want to be assured they are there when they arrive. I looked past one of those entrance locators one time and wound up in a women's restroom. Thankfully, it was vacant. We need locators at the Entrance of worship that tell us where we are. Some of the locators are already in place.

Location in Time

God's people are located in time by observing the Sabbath. After six days of labor, we wake up on day seven and refuse to go to work. Only slaves work seven days a week. We know from the Exodus story that our slave days in the Goshen brick-making factory are over. God liberated us. As free children of God, we've been told to keep the Sabbath. Every seven days we locate ourselves in time by resting. Long before God spoke about a sacred place, He spoke of a sacred time. "And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done" (Gen. 2:2). And He called the day holy. God sanctified time by giving us the Sabbath.

In Christian tradition, we observe the Sabbath on Sunday, the first day of the week. This is the day of resurrection, the day God begins making all things new. We

begin each new block of time by gathering to worship the God who liberates us from slavery and raises us from the dead. Sabbath is our entrance into the new week. By gathering in our sanctuaries, we recall who we are in time. We are the free people of God, filled by the renewing Spirit, gathered for worship, sent into the world as Jesus is sent into the world.

Location in Space

The God who locates us in time also locates us in space. Abraham came to realize the value of holy places. He piled stones in a heap to mark the spot where God spoke to him. As God's family grew, God gave Moses instructions for a tabernacle. A holy place was sanctified in the middle of the camp. When God's family grew larger still and settled in towns and cities, a temple followed. The Spirit-engine of the Temple was the holy of holies, the innermost shrine of the life-giving Spirit. The arrangement of the Temple from outer court to inner shrine was designed to remind people of their location in the presence of a holy God.

The idea of a holy place fell into disarray when people began thinking they could consign God to a location. They tried to keep God in a sanctuary, go visit Him on Sabbath, then leave Him behind as they went out to live. But God refuses to stay in His room. God is always moving out into the world and refuses to be managed or kept

by His creatures. Stephen, in the speech that led to his martyrdom, declared that God will not live in temples “made with human hands” (Acts 7:48). Stephen was suggesting that God’s preferred temple is a community of people.

The architecture of our buildings can be a wonderful reminder to us that we are God’s people. But beautiful architecture alone can never contain God. As we enter the Sunday morning sanctuary, we need to remember we are a called-together people. God resides in the middle of the gathered Church, not in the building. A place is made sacred when God lives among the people gathered there.

In April 2000, I was in Moscow working with Christian leaders. We toured several cathedrals in the Kremlin. As I entered these beautiful churches, my eyes were instantly drawn to the vivid color of the icons that adorned the insides. The story of Jesus surrounded me in color, art, and beauty. The Orthodox Church, much better than we Protestants, understands the need to engage our senses in the worship of God. I was sensually engaged in worship as I “read” the story of Christ in icon after icon. It was a moving experience. As I stood in each cathedral, I felt located. I knew where I was. I was standing in the story of Jesus.

A day later, I worshiped at a Protestant church in Moscow. Fifty to 60 believers gathered on the upper floor of a rented building. The local grocery store was their

next-door neighbor in the three-store strip mall. Folding chairs were set up. Portable instruments were brought in. Pulpit furniture was set in place. And we began to worship. One woman testified to the transformation that had come into her life. She graciously thanked a missionary for coming to her city. He then walked all the way to the back of the sanctuary where she stood. He embraced her. The beauty of Christ in that moment rivaled any icon I saw. God does not live in temples made with hands. He lives in His people. But these people do gather in temples made by hands.

How rich it is when our facilities are God-honoring in both ways—reminding us of our story in the beauty of the surroundings and filled with people who are the temple of God's Spirit.

Centered in Time and Space

We exist in time (Sabbath) and space (sanctuary) because God has called us. God draws us together in time and space so our lives may be centered.

- Without a center, life is fragmented.
- We don't know who or whose we are.
- We become slaves of technology who spend all our time at work.
- We become slaves of pleasure who spend all our time at play.
- We become slaves of boredom who spend all our

time with mind-numbing television programs and computer games.

- Without God as our center, we are scattered in every direction without meaning or identity.
- We don't know where we are.
- Morning fog becomes life fog.
- We live in anxiety and fear.
- Our life has no boundaries.
- We chase advertisements, seductions, and pagan pied pipers.
- We manipulate and are manipulated.
- We stuff our souls with numbing placebos.
- We are caught up in the latest diet fad, the newest car, the fastest computer, the trendiest restaurant, the hottest movie.
- Our life has no center. We are dislocated.

But imagine a patterned life of gathering once every seven days in a familiar setting with the people of God. Imagine a lifetime of being reminded who you are. Imagine a lifetime of centering and recentering your life in Christ.

The Entrance is the act in the worship drama that does this. Can you see and hear it now?

“Good morning. This is Sunday, the Sabbath gift of God to us. We are free children of God. We are gathered in God's presence today because God—the same God who gives us work to do Monday through Saturday—this God has called us here. We are not in the

workplace, so we can forget about producing and selling. We are not in front of a television, so we can forget about being entertained. We are not in a classroom or lecture hall, so we can cease our mastery of knowledge. We are in the presence of the God who longs and loves to set us free. God is up to something good in our lives this morning. It is good that we are here.”

We open our hymnals and begin to sing,

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear,
Now to His temple draw near;
Join me in glad adoration!*

*Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
Hast thou not seen
How thy desires all have been
Granted in what He ordaineth?*

—Joachim Neander

What are we doing? We are locating ourselves in the presence of God. We are entering His presence together.

We may go on and sing “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty” or invite people to “Worship the King.” We may follow the lead of those who have gone ahead of us in worship and read psalms together:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD,
all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep
of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures
forever,
and his faithfulness to all
generations (*Ps. 100*).

The Entrance of the service can last 5 to 10 minutes. It can include a prayer of invocation, music, silence, scripture, a welcome. It can begin with a worship video combining scripture, nature scenes, and music.

It can have variety. A child can walk onto a bare platform and tell people that God enjoys the playful worship of His people. A person from another nation can remind the congregation that worship is a privilege. Other possibilities will come to mind as we think creatively about the opening moments of worship. These various elements are stitched together to tell us we are in the presence of God.

As we look over the five acts of the worship plot, we will find that Acts II and III, the Bad News and the Good News, will suggest how we will shape Act I. For instance, if the Good News is “God can be counted on to keep His word,” and the Bad News is “we live in a world of broken promises and lies,” then the Entrance could locate us in the presence of the God whose words are faithful and true. The worship leader might begin the service like this:

“Good morning. Do you know anyone who has never lied, never fudged, never shaded the truth? If anyone comes to mind, you’ve probably seen God or one of God’s children. This reliable God has called us together this morning. We are in the presence of One who hates shadows where lies lurk and duplicity prowls. God is a straight shooter. What God says today may be hard to hear, but we can know it is true. Let’s open our hearts to the God who sees it and tells it like it is.”

Then we sing “Come, Thou Almighty King”: “Come, and Thy people bless, / And give Thy word success . . .” (anonymous, ca. 1757); or “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place”: “My heart is leaning on the Word— / The written Word of God . . .” (Lidie H. Edmunds).

We next read Ps. 19 and are reminded that God has spoken truthfully in creation and in holy law. A prayer of thanks is offered to the God whose words are dependable. This sets us up to move into the Bad News—that we live in a world of broken promises and lies.

Perhaps the Good News is “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34, KJV) but offers grace freely to every creature. The Bad News is “we live in a world of prejudice and favoritism.” The Entrance on this Sunday might be like this:

“Good morning. Have you ever thought that God has it out for you? That others are higher on God’s help list? Do you consider yourself low on God’s totem pole? Well, for those who think this, I have good news. God loves all of you, especially those who think they are on the least likely list. We are in the presence of a God who offers grace to every creature. Let’s stand and sing together.”

And your voice joins with others as you sing,

*There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.*

*There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good.
There is mercy with the Savior;
There is healing in His blood.*

*For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man’s mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

*If our love were but more simple,
We would take Him at His word;
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord.*

—Frederick W. Faber

Then we read from Ps. 103, where we learn these things:

- God knows what we are made of.
- God has a Fatherlike compassion on His children.
- God's steadfast love lasts forever.

Next, a child tells the congregation that her mother sometimes asks her if she knows how much she is loved. With arms stretched as wide as possible, the child answers, "This much." Isn't it good to be gathered in the presence of a God who loves us "this much"? But then, not everyone in our world experiences such love—and you are into the Bad News.

In shaping the Entrance, you center on the action and character of God that will be declared later in the Good News. A sermon on truth telling calls for an Entrance highlighting the God whose words are dependable. A sermon on favoritism calls for an Entrance emphasizing the God whose arms are stretched wide in love. This means the preacher must work far enough in advance to suggest Entrance themes to the musicians and service planners. Otherwise, people will sit down to a Sunday morning potluck mystery soup.