

*The Reverend Dr. Robert Alan Rimbo, Bishop
Metropolitan New York Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

**Church of Finland Pastoral Conference
2 October 2012**

Why Worship Matters

Introduction

I am so thankful for the opportunity to be with you and share some thoughts about why worship matters. I know I speak for my wife, Lois, who is with us as well, in expressing our thanks for the opportunity, especially to Merja Laaksamo and Timo-Matti Haapiainen who have been to helpful. I greet you on behalf of your sisters and brothers in the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and on behalf of our Presiding Bishop, Mark S. Hanson.

You have heard the gracious introduction. But I still want to make it clear that I am not an academic theologian. I am a pastor. So what I intend to do is offer some assessment of the state of worship in Lutheran parishes with which I am familiar in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I will also share some goals for what worship might be in your parishes because I suspect that some of the struggles and opportunities are parallel. And throughout all of what I am saying today and tomorrow, I hope you will know that the hope, the goal – the *telos* – is to say that worship matters because God matters.

Please join me in praise of God using a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Let us pray.

You are holy, Lord, the only God,
and your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong.
You are great.
You are the Most High.
You are Almighty.
You are Ruler of heaven and earth.
You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good,
Lord God, living and true.
You are love. You are wisdom.
You are humility. You are Endurance.
You are rest. You are peace.

You are joy and gladness.
You are justice and moderation.
You are all our riches, and you suffice for us.
You are beauty.
You are gentleness.
You are our protector.
You are our guardian and defender.
You are our courage. You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith, our great consolation.
You are our eternal life, Great and Wonderful,
Almighty God, Merciful Savior.
Amen.

Hope Number 1. Mission in post-modern times.

How does the church minister to people who are starving for transcendence in post-modern times? What kind of thinking should we be doing as we seek to renew and revitalize worship in the 21st century?

The term post-modernism is used in a wide variety of ways and covers a wide variety of ideas. In university history departments, postmodernism leads to revisionist accounts of events and an ever-increasing fracturing of society into various victim groups who are urged to tell their stories. Postmodernist philosophers absolutize the relativity of truth, stress playfulness, and speak in random aphorisms. Professors of literature and visual artists who accept postmodern theories, for example, claim that there is no meaning in texts or paintings except what the reader or viewer brings to them. My concern is for how postmodern notions influence the people in our pews - or are absent from them.

Postmodernism was inevitable, since modernity believed so blindly and so firmly in the faulty Enlightenment notion of progress. With the rise of technology and science and economics and communications, the modern spirit insisted that every day in every way we were getting better and better – that we could solve the problems of the world with enough scientific discovery and technological fixes.

What the Twentieth Century gave us instead was disastrous world wars and depressions, the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, contemporary ethnic cleansing and tribalism, economic chaos in the face of massive global unemployment, the emptiness of entertainment that keeps dramatically escalating in violence and immorality, and the obvious loss of any moral consensus or commitment to the common good.

The failure of “progress” leads to postmodern spirals of despair and hopelessness. In the United States, the poor outlook for jobs leaves young people without any reason to learn, even as their entertainments deprive them of the brain space or skills to do so. We are amusing ourselves to death.

Most important of all, the failure of the hyped-up promises of science and technology accentuates the loss of truth already inherent in modernist relativizing and in the rejection of authoritative structures or persons with moral authority. Consequently the major characteristic of the postmodern condition is the repudiation of any truth that claims to be truly true. “Christianity might be true for you, but not for me,” our children once said with modernist relativity. But now they are learning that any claim to truth is merely a means to hide an oppressive will to power. The result is the malaise of meaninglessness, the inability to trust anyone, and the loss of any reference point by which to construct one’s life.

Hope Number 2. New Styles in Worship

I do not know how you are responding to this reality. Perhaps you seek to provide new styles, new idioms for worship. We tried that in many churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In response to the downward trends in worship attendance that accompanied the massive changes in U. S. society since the 1960s, many congregations took drastic turns without adequate thinking about theological and ecclesiological implications.

In the face of relativizing truth, some dispensed less truth instead of more, becoming therapeutic instead of theological, with the proliferation of entertainment. Some sacrificed content for form. Some confused worship with evangelism and evangelism with marketing.

As society became more openly pluralistic and less supportive of Christianity in particular some congregations blurred their unique identity as the people of God instead of accentuating it with loving commitment.

As the culture became more and more rootless, some denominations and individual parishes gave up their heritage as communities with long histories and global connections.

In response to the increasing clamor for choice, some American congregations fostered consumerism, according to “felt needs,” instead of embracing what is truly needed.

I believe that is changing in the church in the United States. I believe that many congregations are discovering that worship offers us an escape from the polarities of the so-called “worship wars” between contemporary and traditional. It offers the best from both - or rather, all - sides, since the church’s treasure house is filled with treasures old and new. I do not advocate a wooden traditionalism; Jaroslav Pelikan’s distinction is forever apt: traditionalism is the dead faith of the living whereas tradition is the living faith of the dead. As God’s people beyond the limits of space and time we are linked not only to all God’s people in the past, but also to all those yet to come, so we need both continuity with our heritage and constant reformation.

And please, most of all, do not think I am not interested in evangelism. I am, however, worried about some misconceptions that continue to thrive and an alarming lack of clarity as to what the evangel is. People are still being told we should have at least two points of entry into our congregations - at least two kinds of worship styles to attract seekers, even though the Department of Research and Evaluation of the ELCA has reported no significant numerical growth in those congregations that added contemporary services. The fatal flaw in that kind of

thinking is two-fold: worship is not the point of entry, you are; and, we are all seekers.

Nowhere does the Bible say to worship God in order to attract unbelievers. Nowhere. We worship God because God is worthy of our praise. The Scriptures, do, however, say that we are all witnesses. Evangelism happens in our daily lives, our regular encounters, our simple conversations and caring, or at evangelistic events that have a focus different from worship, in order that we can bring others to worship God. In short, evangelism is the means; worship is the end.

Hope Number 3. User-Friendly-Ness

Another misconception frequently touted is that worship should be user-friendly. And, believe me, I get into a lot of worshiping communities where the service folders are absolutely worthless and the book-juggling is on the order of a circus act, so, I am certainly not advocating worship that alienates or is inaccessible. But Scripture helps us see that being confronted by God is not always comfortable or comforting. God is not easily understandable, nor is it cozy to be a disciple. We must be careful not to offend other seekers, but we must also remember that Christ is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

Hope Number 4. Defining Worship

Perhaps the end I seek for our time together these days and for our long term renewing worship is to answer a far more basic question: What is worship? At times it is clear that not everyone knows. So let me try some thoughts.

The English word comes from the root word: worth; that is, someone is the recipient of the honorific title, “your worship.” There is always a pronoun attached, implicitly or explicitly. So, worship is, first, the language of adoration addressed to God and, secondarily, the language of God equipping us for lives or continuing worship. Good worship will be evangelistic, but that is not its first purpose, for worship is directed to God as its subject and object. Good worship will both nurture the character of believers and the community and also form us to be the kind of people who will reach out in witness and service to the world.

Worship is ritual, not entertainment. It does not always have to be different, filled with new and exciting ways of doing things. Liturgy is meant to “form” us, not to have us “on the edge of our seats.” Worship keeps bringing us back to the old words until we begin to know them by heart and to the old signs until we begin to see and feel what they mean. Our care should be to let the words be heard, to let the images shine, to let the gestures be done clearly so that they speak for themselves.

Worship is prayer. It involves prayerful togetherness, prayerful hearing of the Word, prayerful concern for the world, prayerful acknowledgment of the gifts of God, and prayerful acceptance of God’s commission to go and serve God in our lives. The place where the assembly gathers, wherever that may be, is not a classroom or a dance hall or a theater or a cafeteria or a private chapel; it is a house of common prayer for the people of God.

Worship is not so much a celebration of life as we know it as it is a celebration of the life we hardly expect. While it uses the stuff of everyday life - water, word, table, song, for example, movement, meeting, touching, chairs, flowers - it uses them all with a sense of the holiness of these things. This holiness is derived not so much from their presence in a sacred place as from a recognition of the sacred presence which pervades all places. The people and language and things of our worship are to be handled with reverence and care.

Worship is service. The German word for worship, *Gottesdienst*, is a wonderfully ambiguous term referring to our service of God, God's service of us, and the service we and God offer the world.

Hope Number 5. Truth-Filled Worship

Our worship needs the truth - the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help us God.

The truth that the church has to offer to people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness. To those who criticize Christianity because it has been (and sometimes is) violent and oppressive, we must respond with the acknowledgment that they are correct. But beyond accepting the blame for Christians' failures in history we must recognize the whole truth that we remain sinful and failible. The Scriptures teach us thoroughly that our nature is helplessly sinful, hopelessly lost. That truth forces us to see that we cannot know the truth entirely, that our eyes are blinded, that our understanding of God is only partial. But that does not negate the truth of God nor our recognition of Christ as the truth, the life, and the way.

Against the postmodern rejection of the possibility that there is any universal, overarching truth true to all people in all places, Christianity can humbly suggest a non-oppressive, all-inclusive story of a triune God who creates, redeems and unifies as manifestations of a perfect love for the whole world. We believe in a promising God who always keeps those promises - a truth clearly seen in the First Testament history of Israel and in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again in fulfillment of God's promises. We believe that the meta-narrative of these Scriptures will reach its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus comes again to bring God's promised gracious reign to fruition - and thus the meta-narrative of God's reign already initiated gives us all that we most deeply need of hope, purpose and fulfillment in this present life.

This God of eternal mystery condescends and is revealed to us - a process which invites us to worship. That is why our worship needs to be structured as richly and deeply as possible, so that we never lose sight of the fact that God is the one who enables us to come to worship and God is the one who receives our praise.

Our worship must contain nothing but the truth. Music, songs, Scripture, preaching, forms, architecture, art, gesture and ambience are all means by which God invites, reveals and forms us.

If we use shallow - and please note, I did not say simple - but shallow worship materials, they will not reveal the truth about God. Instead, they will shape shallow theology and form us superficially. Songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or banal music belie the coherence and

integrity of God. Sermons that draw attention to the preacher's eloquence or merely to the superficial needs of the listeners deprive the congregation of the formative power of the scriptural narratives for meeting our genuine needs for repentant insight, constant forgiveness, authentic security, unconditional love, absolute healing, faithful presence, fruitful freedom, compelling motivation, coherent guidance for daily life, and eternal hope.

Worship can never give us the whole truth, but it dare never give us less-than-truth. Our finite minds cannot begin to grasp all that there is to learn about God, but every time the community gathers we have the opportunity to add to our total store of truth what this time of corporate worship contributed. Only by God's grace and in the context of prayer and the whole Christian community can worship leaders prepare services that present as much truth as possible. Against postmodernity's rejection of the past and of authority, in the Church we realize that we are greatly helped in our planning by the wisdom gathered throughout the church's existence, by history's sorting of the good from the less-than-good in hymns and liturgies and interpretations. Now it is our responsibility to sort through what is new in order to choose what is true - keeping God as the subject and object of our worship, nurturing the truthful character of individual believers, and forming the Christian community to be reaching out with the truth that we know.

The world that surrounds us yearns for stability, morality, security, transcendence, fidelity, faith, hope, and love. These deep needs can only be met through the One who meets our deepest needs for truth.

Hope Number 6. Worship that Is Formative

Worship as truth and thereby formative is a major issue. Permit an example: In recent Lenten seasons in various Lutheran congregations I have experienced sermons that spoke of "our journey" and "our temptation" without once mentioning Christ; an invitation to observe a happy Lent this year; chancel dramas that told stories of biblical figures not at all related to Christ atonement or baptismal renewal or anything else Lenten; songs that were full of uplifting happiness, not only during Lent but even on Good Friday; the sharing of "our stories" in a so-called Tenebrae, without any reference to Christ; and a discussion that focused on our feelings about people and how we can crank ourselves up to love them. Meanwhile, solid Lenten hymns were rejected for "upbeat" songs. What has happened to Lent? Can we be formed as a baptized people willing to suffer if we do not reflect upon the willingness of Jesus to bear our sufferings? Are we able to refrain from making grace cheap if we do not pause to remember the agony of Good Friday?

I'm not simply advocating an overly morose Lent or the funeral dirges I experienced as a child. But we need Lent. Our ancestors were wise to put its forty days into the calendar to keep us mindful of the sacrifice of Christ and the love of God and the promise of renewal offered in this season.

In these post-modern times sin and failure are almost universally unacknowledged, though everyone experiences or is aware of disillusionment and despair. In response to this

anguish, Lent and its fulfillment of the forgiveness of the promising God are great gifts the Church can offer the world around it.

Hope Number 7. Intentional Congregations

One of my hopes for worship is a revitalization of congregations. Sociologist of religions, Diana Butler Bass points to various types of parishes and makes a case for calls “intentional congregations.” I would offer the possibility that we might call them confessional and contextual congregations, which sounds very Lutheran to my ears.

These days folks in leadership throughout the church know the story of what Dr. Bass names “St. What-A-Surprise,” a particularly vital, healthy, and growing congregation. I hear this kind of story all the time from folks all over the Church.

What fosters this vitality? Dr. Bass groups such congregations into three categories: The evangelical style; the ‘new paradigm’ style which removes anything resembling an historic *ordo*; and the ‘diagnostic style’ which borrows from psychological therapy and the social sciences.

The track record and potential of each of these three styles is clearly successful. But she finds enough *exceptions* to question how universal that success might actually be. She says that there are enough vital, thriving congregations (“St. What-A-Surprises”) that are theologically liberal to suggest that a switch to a more conservative theology is not required. And there are enough vital, thriving congregations that feature traditional liturgies and worship spaces to prove that not all churchgoers are after a ‘symbolically neutral’ worship service. And, finally, Dr. Bass notes, there are enough thoughtful, theologically mature congregational leaders with a sense of identity and vision at *both* declining and thriving congregations to confirm that there’s more to vitality than organization and leadership. So what’s left?

Mainline observers - among them, I fear, certain leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - have largely overlooked an outside-the-box fourth possibility, the emergence of what Dr. Bass calls the intentional congregation. I think these congregations bear the marks of Lutheranism, marks which we dare not lose. These congregations form no national movement and claim no single source of inspiration. They have no party, no platform, no seminary, no publication, no organization. Each is a unique and inventive blend of local vision (what I would call context), denominational identity (what I would call confessional integrity) and Christian practice (what I would call liturgy among other things like catechesis, serious devotion to the Scriptures, etc.). Such congregations exist. I know. Over the years I have been a member of a few of them. Dr. Bass writes,

“Intentional congregations are neither ‘conservative’ nor ‘liberal.’ They are not seeker-oriented, but seekers are attracted by their spiritual practices. Like any other human community, they have their share of conflict and dysfunction. These churches resist labeling, serve no identifiable theological ‘party’ and reject programmatic fixes.

“Here’s how I define them: In these congregations, transmission of identity, tradition, and practice occurs not by birth, and thus it is not assumed. Rather, transmission occurs through choice and through reflective engagement, as a process both individual and communal. These churches tend to be theologically moderate-to-liberal and are reinvigorating historic practices based upon ancient Christian tradition; they might also be called ‘neo-traditional’ because they reach back so as to move forward. In these congregations, people choose to embrace or recreate practices drawn from the long Christian tradition - practices that bind them together and connect them with older patterns of living as meaningful ways to relate to a post-Christian society.”

Hope Number 8. Cared-For Language

Among my hopes for renewing worship is that we care for language, verbal and visual. Among many things this means being attentive to how we speak of the God who is beyond gender and how we speak as the people of God who are radically inclusive. At the same time, our faithfulness to tradition and our caring for literary art would cause us to dismiss ancient poetic treasures, even with what might be called sexist language, only with great care.

We need also to be aware of the amazing impact of the visual in our culture. I think it is possible for us to create new stained glass, for example, using electronic media and projection onto screens. But, again, care must be taken that such efforts not be cheesy or manipulative. There are herds of golden calves awaiting our worship. Let us take care that our images are clear.

So, also, our gestures. I am convinced that those who are to preside at the liturgy, for example, should learn from dancers and actors. Two of the most formative books I have read are Gabe Huck’s still-relevant and helpful *Liturgy with Style and Grace*, the title of which succinctly states my hope, and William Seth Adams’ *Shaped by Images*, which has helped me think and visualize more clearly about presiding at worship.

Hope Number 9. Community Revived and Individuals Respected

While I have spoken about my hope for “intentional congregations” engaged in renewing worship, I want also to express my hope that we reach a balance that offers revived communities and respected individuals simultaneously. In the face of individualism which is probably not restricted to the United States, we need the reminder that worship is about something other than confirming us in our individual ways. Worship shapes a common life, a life with others. It places individuals in community, and the people I talk to sense a deep need for that very gift.

Such worship will also prevent us from nationalistic impulses, ideological movements and utopian programs that seek to shape human communities and command the allegiance of individuals. The kind of community to which the church is committed is not determined by territory, ideology, or fantasy. It is a place where each individual stands equally before God’s judgment and mercy and where the well-being of the least cannot be ignored.

As Thomas Schattauer writes, in the helpful book *Inside Out, Worship in an Age of Mission*,

The communal character of the liturgical assembly is a critical aspect of the mission of God in contemporary circumstances. On the one hand, it critiques every notion of the autonomous individual and affirms the fundamentally social nature of human existence. On the other hand, it critiques every form of human community that disregards the dignity and well-being of the individual, including the structures and practices of churchly life itself. This critique takes place because the church, constituted in its liturgical assembly, is a distinctive community amid the plurality of communities, the one community that refers us ultimately to the fellowship that God establishes and promises to be the destiny of human existence.

There is one remaining hope, one remaining goal yet to be addressed but before I get to it, let me summarize. I hope that our worship will be characterized by ritual and prayer, holy expectation and multi-layered service; that our worship will contain and convey the truth; that our worship will form us in the image of Christ and help us toward Christian maturity; that our congregations will be restored to communities that confess the faith in their current contexts, never forsaking the Gospel of Jesus crucified and risen; that we will care for our language about God and about ourselves while not forsaking the beauty of our inheritance; that in the face of social patterns to the contrary, we will commit ourselves to being communities in Christ which rejoice in the company of each individual.

All of which is said in the ELCA's statement on the practice of Word and Sacraments, *The Use of the Means of Grace*:

Baptism and baptismal catechesis join the baptized to the mission of Christ. Confession and absolution continually reconcile the baptized to the mission of Christ. Assembly itself, when that assembly is an open invitation to all peoples to gather around the truth and presence of Jesus Christ, is a witness to the world. The regular proclamation of both Law and Gospel, in Scripture reading and preaching, tells the truth about life and death in all the world, calls us to faith in the life-giving God, and equips the believers for witness and service. Intercessory prayer makes mention of the needs of all the world and of all the church in mission. When a collection is received, it is intended for the support of mission and for the concrete needs of our neighbors who are sick, hurt, and hungry. The holy supper both feeds us with the body and blood of the Christ and awakens our care for the hungry ones of the earth. The dismissal from the service sends us in thanksgiving from what we have seen in God's holy gifts to service in God's beloved world. In the teaching and practice of congregations, the missional intention for the means of grace needs to be recalled. By God's gift, the Word and the Sacraments are set

in the midst of the world, for the life of the world.

Hope Number 11. Mystagogy

Finally, I want to again say to you this simple truth: Worship Matters because God Matters. All of our work in preparing for and leading God's People in worship points to our most fundamental ministry as pastors, liturgists, musicians, artists, poets, dancers: the ministry of mystagogy. We are called to lead people into an ever-growing relationship with God who is worthy of our praise. And since I believe this conference has a retreat character to it I want to speak about this with utmost concern and profound hope.

I think it's true - don't you? – that we who are pastors need a periodic reminder that God matters and that it is this particular God we're talking about.

One of my favorite writers, Robert Farrar Capon is his name, says that when human beings try to talk about God we are like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina. We simply don't have the equipment to understand or talk about something so utterly beyond us. But that has never stopped us from trying. In fact that's one of the reasons we make gods for ourselves.

We're always fooling around making alternative gods to meet our needs. And if you think you don't have any of these little idols around your office, your house, your church, let me suggest a few that I've found without going into too much detail in order to spare myself from embarrassment.

My checkbook or my debit card, for instance. What is it *you* and the people whom you serve invest in most heavily? What does that teach you about what you worship?

My calendar. What gets the largest share of *your* time – which, after all, is more precious than your money? When it comes time to rest, or to pray, or to wait on the Lord, what gets in the way? Whatever it is, it's a god, an idol.

There are others. A job that promises security. A house that promises comfort. A pension that promises protection. A relationship that promises safety. A position in the community that promises power. A car that promises prestige. All the little idols lined up on the shelf – none of them bad things, by the way, did you notice?

The raw material of a false god is almost *never* a bad thing. It's usually a good thing, like gold, made into an ultimate thing, like God. And that's where the trouble starts, because things are not God. They never have been, and they never will be. Things may produce results for a while; they may even produce results for a *long* while, but talk to someone whose job has just evaporated, or whose marriage has just ended, or whose health has just failed, and let *that* person tell you what an idol, a false god, is worth.

Believers throughout the centuries have tried to prove the existence of God or to describe God, but very few have been satisfied with their efforts. Their words turn out to be too frail to do the job. They cannot paint a true portrait of God, because creatures cannot capture their creator

any better than a bed of oysters can dance *Swan Lake*.

The best any of us has ever been able to do is to tell what the experience of God is like – how it sounds, how it feels, what it reminds us of. Whether the experience originates in the pages of the Bible or in the events of our own lives, the best any of us has ever been able to do is simply to say what it's like when we are in the presence of God. And that is worship.

Some days God comes as a judge, walking through our lives wearing white gloves, checking where we've dusted and exposing all the messes we've made. Other days God comes as a shepherd, fending off our enemies and feeding us by hand. Some days God comes as a whirlwind who blows all our certainties to pieces. Other days God comes as a brooding hen who hides us in the shelter of her wings. Some days God comes as a dazzling monarch and other days as a silent, suffering servant. If we were to name all the ways God comes to us, the list would go on forever: God the teacher, the challenger, the helper, the stranger; God the lover, the adversary, the yes, the no. God is many, which is at least one of the mysteries behind our Christian idea of the Trinity which says that God is, in fact, a relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We say that God comes to us in all kinds of ways as different from one another as they can be.

The other mystery is that God is one. To our way of thinking, there cannot be a fierce God and a loving God, a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New. But we need to remember that when we experience God in contradictory ways, that's *our* problem, not God's. We cannot solve it by driving wedges into the divine self. All we can do is decide whether or not to open ourselves up to a God whose freedom and imagination boggle our minds. This is mystagogy.

We pastors and preachers tie ourselves into knots trying to explain God to people. I don't know why we hold ourselves responsible for explaining things that can't be explained. All we can do when we talk about God is sniff around at the edges of the mystery, hunting for something closer to an experience than an understanding.

I have to say that I believe that God, the God I have come to know in Jesus Christ, is interested in producing life – not mere pulse and respiration life, but abundant life, extravagant life, which has very little to do with comfort, security, or prestige, but marks our worship as Christians.

We can bow down to the false gods we've created. That's one of our choices. We can serve them. Or we can stand up and seek again the living God. It's our choice which way we will turn: toward the shelf full of idols or toward the true God.

We experience that God most reliably in worship, like the psalmist who I imagine was out in the fields looking up at the stars when the song rose up: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge."

The prophet Isaiah tried: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew."

John, the writer of Revelation, tried: "At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven

stood a throne, with one seated it. And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.”

I believe that Jesus is the one who most reliably makes God known, not so much in descriptions or definitions or facts that are provable, but as the one who walks with us, guides us, heals us, helps us, understands us, feeds us, holds us, and promises to be with us forever.

Many of us have a fear-filled idea of God. For whatever reason - childhood experience, meteorologists and insurance companies blaming God for bad weather – many of us see God first as a judge. We read and remember fearsome stories of hellfire and brimstone while we neglect words like the psalmist’s: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so. Those he redeemed from trouble.”

And that God gave us a gift. Not a lifeless thing – silver or gold – but a person. Not an angel, not another patriarch like Abraham or another leader like Moses, not another prophet. God gave us God’s only Son who comes to us in Word and Sacrament.

Think about that. Work that over in your soul. Make it come alive for you, understandable for you, believable for you. And you will see that worship matters because God matters. The greatest of all God’s gifts demonstrates that.

Because of this Jesus we gather week after week, season after season, year after year. Here we meet this Risen Christ. Here the Word of God is proclaimed and sung and encountered. Here Christ comes to us in his own body and blood, cradled in our hands and on our tongues. Here we passionately participate in the paschal mystery of Christ as we seek to serve his world and his people. Here we are reminded that worship matters because God matters.

God bless you in your worship. Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you.

*The Reverend Dr. Robert Alan Rimbo, Bishop
Metropolitan New York Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*