

Symbols Unite Two Realities, Visible and Invisible

by Michael Flowers

The sermon explores the importance of symbols and embodied language in worship, highlighting the unity of heaven and earth through Jesus Christ.

Duration: 34:58

Scripture: Psalm 103:20, Psalm 148:2, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 22:37, John 1:14

Topics: "Symbols"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of having an attention span in worshiping God. He mentions the harmful effects of technology on our brain chemistry and how it can distract us from focusing on God. The sermon then delves into the topic of symbols and embodied language in worship, highlighting the pre-modern worldview of the Bible that sees no separation between the material and spiritual realms. The speaker emphasizes the significance of bodily postures in expressing our heart's attentiveness to God in worship, referencing Romans 6:13.

Transcript

We're going to continue our series called Why? Why Symbols and Embodied Language in Worship? Why Symbols and Embodied Language in Worship? You know, as we enter into the world of the Bible, it's a strange world. The world of the Bible is a very strange world. It's pre-modern and it has no assumption that there is this separation between earth and heaven, between the visible and the invisible, between the material and the spiritual.

I mean, we see that in the psalm that we invoked this morning, invoking all of creation to praise the Lord. And a part of that creation, most of the psalm was dealing with the scene, the created order here in heaven. But right there in verse two in Psalm 148, it invokes the angels.

That is, we are called in our worship in the prayer book of Israel to invoke the angels, just as I would invoke you to pray for me. We're invoking the angels. It says, praise the Lord, all you his angels.

We're addressing the angels at that moment because really they're not up there. There is no two story universe in the world of the Bible. The whole worldview of the scriptures everything lives on one story.

It's on one story. It's a one story universe. It's a one story cosmos where heaven and earth are being reunited from the split caused by sin and death.

But through Jesus Christ and the incarnation, the first coming here we have with Mary and Jesus. Jesus takes on the flesh of Mary, becomes a human being and unites heaven and earth in himself, in the very person, in the very body of Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human. The implications of Christmas is the unification of heaven and earth again.

He is uniting all things where God now through Christ fills all things, all things is all things. Right. What Paul says in Ephesians fills all things and he holds all things together by the logos, the word of his power.

That living word in Jesus Christ, who, who became flesh and tabernacled amongst us is the word in the Greek tabernacled amongst us, set his tent on the earth and lived amongst us in our liturgical worship in the Psalms. We're addressing angels because we're before the throne. The throne is not some distant place when we enter in.

That's why when Father Les brought us in this morning, you notice we change the order of the the prayer of acclamation and the call to purity. Really, the liturgy doesn't start out with, hi, how are you? It doesn't start out that way. It starts out God centered.

It starts out blessed be God. Right. And so what we want to do is work back to where we're trained to stand up and just go there because we need to greet God first, because we're all here.

We have a time of passing the peace where we deal with the with the reconciliation and the reception of the body within the liturgy. But we begin with God. You like that? That doesn't mean that we don't like each other or that we're ignoring you.

It's just that we're in the presence of the king. Right. And so when we're in the presence of the king, we first address the king.

We don't say, hey, you little giant over there. No, it's wow. Blessed be God, the father, the son and the Holy Spirit and blessed be his kingdom, which we are entering through the liturgy.

OK, Psalm 103, verse 20, same thing. Bless the Lord. Oh, you, his angels.

You ever seen this before? Invoking the unseen heavenly realm. Bless the Lord. Oh, you, his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of the Lord.

Bless the Lord, all his hosts, that is that band of angel armies that are before the throne of God, the host of heaven, his ministers who do his will. The angels are his ministers, his sent ones who do his will, who are sent actually to serve us, who will inherit salvation. Hebrews one says, is that good that we have ministers of incredible power and might to help us to aid us in our inheritance of salvation? I mean, you know, the angels unlocked the prison doors for Paul and Silas one time and let them out of prison.

I mean, there there is an interpenetration of the material world and the unseen world. And we enter that by faith, through grace, by faith, through grace. And so this is a world where we must have eyes of faith to live.

We live by faith, not by not by sight. We live by faith, not by sight. The Enlightenment, modernism, postmodernism, all of all of these different worldviews that have impacted the way we view ourselves and

reality, church and spiritual symbols, we're trying to shake that off.

We're trying to go, oh, no, I recognize that I'm going to be pre-modern here. I will believe in the assistance of angels. I will believe that God intervenes.

I will believe that as we anoint people with oil, they will be healed. So prayer and worship are not quite the same thing in this regard. Right.

If I ask you to pray for me, I'm not worshipping you. So when we invoke the angels, we're not worshipping the angels. So we're merely doing what scripture has laid out for us to do.

That may be a new concept for some of you. It's OK to invoke the angels. It's not worshipping them.

Our New Testament reading in Revelation five describes a scene of worship in the heavenly kingdom where we see the saints and the angels numbering thousands upon thousands, each holding a harp, symbolizing worship and melody, really, I mean, symbolizing melodious worship and golden bowls full of incense. This is all imagery from the tabernacle in the temple out of the Old Testament. They're seeing the greater reality of worship, which Moses was called to build in the Old Covenant.

He was called to build according to the pattern in heaven. John, the revelator, is opening up the unseen realm for us, and he's showing us the continuity of heaven and earth in the heavenly worship. And the golden bowls full of incense says this.

It interprets it, says the golden bowls full of incense are the prayers of the saints, the prayers of the saints. This is the heavenly worship and intercession, music, singing, prayers. And then we go over and we see what that seventh seal looked like, that the lamb was worthy to open Revelation eight, the first five verses, the lamb opened the seventh seal.

There was silence in heaven for about a half an hour. It's so funny because there's no clock in heaven, but from down here he was looking at his son. Oh, it's about a half an hour now.

And then I saw the seven angels who stand before God. You see, in the tabernacle, in the temple, there were no chairs. And that's why to this day, the Eastern Orthodox don't have chairs in their worship.

They're standing because it's an appropriate thing to do, to stand in the presence of the king. Right. And the reason why in the in the tabernacle and the temple that everyone is standing is because the sacrifices never ended.

The high, great high priest, Jesus Christ, did not come and finish the work, and so everyone stood. Right. But now Christ has ascended and he's seated the great high priest.

But here. The angels who stand before God and seven trumpets, communication, prophetic communications is the symbology there, seven trumpets were given to them and another angel came and stood at the altar. That's why we have an altar.

On Earth, as it is in heaven. This is the answer to the prayer of Jesus, right on Earth, as it is in heaven. I mean, we need a lot of us pray that and reject things like this because we don't really understand what we're praying.

But I'm showing you on Earth as it is in heaven. Right. Isn't it great to see the continuity? And there was an altar with a golden censer and it was a golden censer.

And he was given much incense to offer. And the aroma and the fragrance of the incense with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne and the smoke of the incense. Verse four, with the prayers of the saints mingling together, heaven and earth rose before God from the hand of the angel.

Wow. And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar. And he threw it on the earth and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

OK, thy kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven. We're going to leave that. That's apocalyptic literature.

And there's a lot that we could say just about the book of Revelation. We'll have to do a class on the book of Revelation someday. And this is the heavenly reality of worship, interpenetrating, interpenetrating, interacting with the earth from heaven.

And so the church lives in two realities. The church lives in two realities, the visible material realm and the invisible spiritual realm. There's one church on Earth and in heaven.

Entering the sanctuary is coming into a unification with the kingdom of God, the heavenly kingdom. And so our earthly liturgy, then, is concerned and is in concert with the heavenly liturgy. If you read through the book of Revelation, read it with liturgical eyes and you'll see it as a liturgical book.

And much of our worship and much of the liturgy is patterned after the book of Revelation. It shows the heavenly worship, the heavenly kingdom and the prostrations and the bowing and the singing and the worship and the incense and everything that we are giving sign and symbol to here on Earth. We're uniting seen and unseen in that one act of worship in Christ Jesus, because in Christ we've all been risen.

Right. We're all raised. We've been seated with Christ in heavenly places.

And so there is a sense in a reality that we are there through baptism. We have been united in the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Paul says so boldly, he says, hey, keep looking above where Christ is and where you're seated in heavenly places.

And so there is a sense that when we worship in the earthly liturgy, we have to appropriate our heavenly place in Christ. All of this is by faith. We live by faith, not by sight.

And this is the difference between a dead liturgical church who does not see and believe these things and merely just mouths the words. Right. That's the big difference.

And so when people come here, they always tell me that they're touched by the Holy Spirit and that God is in our midst is because we are striving to believe this. And we're striving to shake off our iPhones and everything that's happened in our brain chemistry to rob us of attention. And man, I'm going to send you guys just an article I read yesterday in The Guardian.

It is such a powerful, powerful article on the problem of technology and what it's doing to us in terms of our brain chemistry. And they're interviewing all of the people that say invented the like button at Facebook. They're unplugging because they see the harm that it's doing.

I mentioned that because we need an attention span to worship God and this can rob us of our attention span. I know the addictive nature of the iPhone. I have the big one.

I have the big one for a reason. It's a plus because I want the plus screen and I am just I just feel like an alcoholic reaching for it all the time. You get that? It really is a chemical thing that happens.

And they know they talk about the addictive qualities of technology now and how that ties in to further the capitalistic desires and the consumer desires that are within us to buy. Buy. It's all marketing related, right? The liturgy introduces us to powerful symbols and embodied postures taken from the world of the scriptures.

And so we stand in worship in honor of the Lamb of God, the crucified and risen Lord. We stand because Christ is risen. He's been risen from the dead, destroying the reign of sin and death.

And we call this to mind when we stand. And I would encourage you to call that to mind. That as you stand, you're standing in the presence of the risen one who under his feet is destroying every enemy, the final enemy.

To be destroyed will be death. And so as we do our posture, as we stand, then our posture is embodied worship. Our bodies display the inward reality.

We lift our hands to God in thanksgiving and praise for the redemption of the world, for the glory to be revealed and to bless the Lord, to bless his name. Paul says this in first Timothy to eight, I desire then that in every place men and women should pray, lifting up holy hand without anger and quarreling, lifting up holy hands where the peace of Christ has really made the difference in all of their relationships without anger, without quarreling in unity. We see this throughout the Psalms, a posture of honor and surrender and lifting the hands.

It means that I open my life to you and I surrender. It's different than this. You see, this is liturgical body language, psychology, one on one where you talk about body language, right? The Bible invented it.

The Bible invented it. And so it's body language. The Bible calls us to a worship oriented body language, a worship oriented body language, embodied practices, escaping the body language.

I'm spiritual and I'm Gnostic and the only the spiritual, which means the disembodied disenchanted is real. The liturgy catechizes not only our spoken language, but it unites our bodily expressions, our bodily postures or a language, our bodily postures or a language meant to express the heart's attentiveness to God in worship. Romans 6, 13, do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin.

Instead, give yourselves completely to God. The best way to do that is worship. It begins there.

Give yourselves completely to God for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body, use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Love that we kneel and we prostrate ourselves as rites of repentance.

That's expressing repentance when we kneel or when we prostrate ourselves, we're acknowledging our need of salvation from sin and death. And in repentance, we confess our sins, invoking God's mercy on our lives. We kneel before the one who is gracious and compassionate, rich in mercy, rich in love.

He's dealt with our sins in such a way as far as the east is from the west, that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us. And this is why Paul in Ephesians 3, 14 says, for this reason, I bow my knees before the father. Revelation 7, 11, and all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God.

Amen. So why don't we consider now why we actually bow before certain symbols in the liturgy? OK, let's look at that. Why do we make certain signs and do certain things with our bodies? You know, we live in a world of symbols.

We live in an ocean of symbols, secular liturgies carry powerful symbols, branding their consumer products. Right. A symbol can reach more deeply into the psyche than words.

We know this and marketers know this. A symbol can be more effective than their words because it goes much, much deeper. We do this all the time with our bodies, we what is this, we clap our hands when we want to give applause or when we want to affirm something.

Yes, we clap our hands, we do. What's that? The OK sign. Yeah, this is secular liturgy, right? The OK sign, thumbs up, secular liturgies.

When you want to communicate a point with passion and anger, you start doing this. Right. You ever seen somebody do that? I mean, you want to get out of their way when they start poking you in the chest, because at that moment, that person's body and soul are united and they're ready to launch.

That's what happens when your body and soul unite. That's why you need to unite it in the presence of the Lord so that our passions come under the control of the Holy Spirit. Right.

This is really, really practical. If we don't learn to bring our passions under the control of the Holy Spirit, we'll be doing this all the time with people. Right.

And the road rage and people now are just pulling out their guns and shooting people. No questions asked. Secular liturgies, what is that? Stop, hand up, palm out.

Yeah. Now, here in Missouri, I noticed we moved here from California where you can be driving down the road and people do this to strangers. What are they doing? They're saying hello.

They're just waving at you. You get this. You ever seen that? It's all over the place.

You live in Johnson County. They don't do that there. I've never seen it in Johnson County.

That's Kansas. Kansas, not Missouri. That's right.

We're going to start the border wars all over again here. I'm sorry. May the peace of the Lord be all so with you, Missouri and Kansas.

Yeah. But you see what I'm getting at. We have no problem using our bodies to communicate and it's symbolic.

We have absolutely no problem. But try to make the sign of the cross for the first time. Oh, I'm split.

I'm split there. Modernity has trained me to separate my body from worship. So when we read even the biblical injunctions of lifting your hands and go prostrate and bowing and kneeling, we have a hard time

connecting.

And I would say press through it, press through that and use your body as an instrument of righteousness, as an instrument of worship and learn how to give your whole being to God. That's what the scripture is calling us to. It's a very Hebraic concept, body, soul and spirit, one person, not all divided up.

And think about that. Those embodied signs are second nature. We don't have to think about them.

We just do it. Well, the early Christians understood the power of symbols. They're all over the catacombs.

They're all over the place. When you study early Christianity. And so this is my classical Christianity and ancient liturgies incorporate symbolic gestures to call one's whole being into alignment to the present reality of the kingdom, because, as we said, symbols reach to that place of consciousness.

They go right to the heart. And the scriptures are the source for our symbols. Imagine taking all of the symbols and the metaphors out of the scriptures, just extracting them.

Imagine reading a great piece of literature with no metaphors or no symbols. It'd be pretty boring, colorless, flat, and the heart would not be touched. Imagine that.

Imagine a world with no symbols. Is Jesus really a lamb? And what does that lamb communicate? Where does that go, especially if you've been trained in the old covenant scriptures? John said, behold, the lamb who takes away the sin, but he's not a woolly creature, is he? But we see the symbol of the lamb that speaks so powerfully of Jesus and his redemption. And are we really sheep sometimes in our intelligence? Yeah, I heard they're really dumb and I can relate to that.

But but it's the great symbol of Jesus as the good shepherd, the great shepherd of the sheep. Right. And that connects us to him as his people, the sheep of his pasture.

See where I'm going with this. These are words that are symbols. Numbers carry symbolic communication.

The Greek and the Hebrew alphabet carry symbolic language. After all, is Jesus really the alpha and the omega book of Revelation says he's the alpha and the omega. What does that mean? The beginning and the end.

OK. Now, I'm going to play with that word in because he's not the beginning and the end. He's the beginning and the goal to tell us he's the beginning of the new beginning.

He's the beginning of the new beginning. He calls creation into existence and that creation is being redeemed and there is no end to his kingdom or of his peace. And the government will rest upon his shoulders.

And so he's the beginning and the goal to tell us of where creation is going. He's the end of this old creation and he's making all things new. But we use alpha and omega, we use symbolic language to say that because that has a powerful resonance that goes deeper into our consciousness than trying to explain a theological concept.

We need to get the concept and then forget about it because we got it and we go alpha, omega. I get it. You don't have to unpack that anymore.

It's really powerful. Pathetic writings are full of symbols. The poetry in the songs of the Bible communicate symbolically and metaphorically as the as the deer pants.

So my soul longs for you. So my soul thirst for living water. The construction of the tabernacle involved meticulous instructions in the old covenant scriptures involving colors, artistic skills of all kinds, the making of vestments, the Ark of the Covenant and Exodus 25 over the Ark of the Covenant, there was winged cherubim on top of the mercy seat where the presence of the Lord would just hover over that.

And so now think about that in contradistinction with the way the Reformation interpreted the second commandment, thou shall make no graven images. Well, there were plenty of images in worship. They just weren't graven in images to be worshipped in and of themselves.

And so four walls in a sermon is what we get in some reformational interpretation. It's OK to have a sermon. It's OK to have a house, but don't put any paintings, don't put any icons, don't put any symbols in those things because you're an idol worshiper.

That is such a misinterpretation of the way the church has read the symbolic literature throughout the years, you see. And this is what makes it hard for Anglicans because we're sort of semi Protestants in this. You see what I mean? We don't buy that.

We need all of the symbols that we can get. We need all of the color. We know of the artistic expression.

We need everything that we can get to give glory to God and to reveal God to us. One thing we're doing here slowly but surely is just restoring, restoring beauty, restoring the aesthetic. And someday we won't be in this gym.

We'll have our own place. It's going to be a beautiful place for worship. Amen.

And it won't be the fog machines and the lights and implementing, you know, a rock concert like we have all done. I was a vineyard worship leader in California, I pioneered that stuff, and that's great, but it's just that takes me back to where I was the night before at the club listening to a good band. I don't want to go there in worship.

I want to be taken somewhere else. I want to be taken into the kingdom of God and I need everything visually not to contradict that. And we're not criticizing those who are doing that.

I mean, we've all played a role in that. And we're just saying, no, this is this is what the Lord's calling us to pioneer while we love and we pray and fellowship with all those who call on the name of the Lord, their Lord and ours. Amen.

And so with all of that, why shouldn't why shouldn't Christian liturgy employ biblical symbolism? If it's throughout the scriptures, if it's throughout the worship of heaven, then what's the big deal if the tabernacle and the temple were created like in the temple on the walls and around it was created with pomegranates and leaves and trees to emulate the Garden of Eden? And yet Jesus is not taking us to the Garden of Eden, he's taking us to a much better place, the heavenly kingdom. The word symbol is derived from two Greek words, *syn*, which means together with and *bolō*, which means this is this is interesting, a casting or a throwing. And it means to bring two realities together and place them side by side.

A real symbol means to bring two realities together and place them side by side, seen and unseen. The church is both material and spiritual, seen and unseen. Things in the material world are on Earth and include objects and symbols used in worship and in the worship of heaven.

All symbols preach the gospel. Our bodies preach the male and female coming together in the union of husband and wife preach the union of Christ and his church. That's the sacramental nature of marriage.

That's the mystery that Paul talks about. Our bodies preach the gospel, man and woman in unity together. And so we employ all the senses in our worship incense this morning and we see that in the worship of heaven.

We see the symbols of Christ, which are the cross, the altar and the gospel book. And this is why we bow before the cross. We bow before the altar and we bow before the reading of the gospel as the priest or the deacon comes down and says the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one reading that at that time is an icon of Christ, is an image of Christ reading the gospel. And that gospel book is an image, is a symbol of Jesus Christ himself, because this is the gospel of the Lord. These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And we honor, we venerate these words, we don't worship the words, but we venerate the words, that's for sure. We honor the words, the words point us and take us to the reality who is Christ. So when we bow, people have asked me this.

I am saying thank you, Jesus. I'm not saying thank you, altar book or thank you, altar, the thank you cross. That's not what we're doing.

That's taking us to the reality. The cross is taking us to the reality of the reconciliation of the cosmos, one on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus as we make the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross is a beautiful gesture which reminds the faithful of both the cross of salvation while invoking the Holy Trinity, because we're making the the actual shape of the cross.

But it's in the name of the father and the son and the Holy Spirit. And so it's bodily prayer. And the way I learned how to do this was in my private time with the Lord.

It was very hard for me because I had all of these other associations that were getting in the way. And so my mind was arguing with my body. And so I came before the Lord.

I sat before the Lord in my prayer time and I began just to do it. My mind came into alignment with my body. In the name of the father and the son.

And so all may, but none must do this. I mean, we're not saying that you have to conform and do this. I'm trying to encourage you with some of the meaning behind it.

For us Westerners, we need to understand what we're doing. It helps. And so if I can get a rationale for why I'm doing this, it helps me.

It will take time for some of you. Some of you will really struggle to do this. And that's OK.

It's all right. Some of you may choose not to do it. That's OK.

It's totally OK. But I'm here explaining why some of us are doing this. This is an embodied sign which prepares a person to receive blessing.

So every time a priest blesses in the name of the father and son of the Holy Spirit, we cross ourselves or we do it to sanctify a moment, sanctify this to be for your people, the body and blood and make the sign of the cross over the elements. That means to set apart, to sanctify. The early church fathers attested to the use of the sign of the cross, Tertullian in 250 A.D. described the commonness of the sign of the cross.

And he says this, this is a quote and it's in your bulletin. That's where we bless the children on that page before the notes. In all of our travels and movements, in all of our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes at the bath and at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down and sitting down and whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.

It's interesting. And so they're worshipping it all of life and they're remembering that Christ has died and Christ is risen. It's offering your bodies as a living sacrifice.

It's a way of doing that. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, 386 A.D., in his catechetical lectures stated, let us then not be ashamed to confess the crucified. He, the cross, our seal made with boldness by our fingers on our brow and in everything over the bread we eat and the cup we bless in our comings and in our goings out before our sleep and when we lie down and when we awake and I go to bed this way and I wake up this way.

When we are traveling and when we are at rest, we make the sign of the cross. It had become such a habitual thing that all of life was made and signed with the cross. Paul talks about enemies of the cross.

And so this is one of those ways that we can remember the cross and embody the cross and take up our cross as we follow Jesus and as we worship him as the one who is crucified for us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Amen.

Let's stand together.

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