

## Reflections on Early Service at Bethel

We have spent a lot of time as a community discussing worship at Bethel, and I wanted to prayerfully commit to words some of my own thoughts about where we are and why our Early Service is so meaningful to me. Note that this is difficult for me because I strive to avoid evaluating worship of God in terms of my own desires, my own comfort, or other measures of success. Nevertheless, any critique is bound to be a personal thing, and I do not wish to be perceived as asserting a unique claim to truth. Particularly so in the scattershot thoughts below, wherein I call out aspects of our particular worship service which strike me as important.

**It is deliberate:** Words, music, structure, pacing, form, and function reflect the thought which has been committed over years—even decades now—to the construction of this service. Elements are neither introduced nor are they cast aside unreflectively. And as it should be, bookending and pervading this deliberation is an attitude and practice of prayer.

**It is sacred:** Worship is set apart in a variety of ways which make the weekly communal worship of God a distinct, holy, and “other” experience. Markers are set in place to distinguish *this* place, *this* time, *these* sights and sounds, and *this* structure and substance from the ordinary. For those who attend to these cues, there is no mistaking that we are about something truly *extra-ordinary*.

**It is sacramental:** I use this term in two senses. First, we celebrate and remember the sacraments as instituted by Christ and recognized by our tradition. In particular, the Eucharist is the central and climactic event of morning worship each week. In the second sense, the words, music, and actions set in place for the celebration are intended to reflect the given grace of God, and to encourage us towards daily sacramental living.

**It is contemplative:** Carrying the approach taken for the planning and execution of the service forward into the experience of each congregant, we are encouraged to consciously order our thoughts and feelings around the adoration, worship, thanksgiving, and repentance due our God. It is only in silence that we can hear His still, small voice. While auditory silence is only a first step to the silent, receptive mind, it is a crucial step which we endeavor to support.

**It is regular:** Our Father created a Universe with inherent cycles, and we attempt to embrace those patterns in a manner which brings coherence to our lives. Our culture might perceive that these rhythms circumscribe our free will. However, we are reassured that the cycles of life in this Universe are life-giving and are not a threat to our freedom. The value of the yearly, weekly, and daily rhythm are recognized in the observance of the Church calendar, in readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, and in the manifold structure of worship, even as these regularities manifest our connection to the larger Body.

**It is real in the material sense:** The objects, actions, symbols, time, and space of our worship are taken as real and created objects with meaning and history, and worthy of respect on their own terms. Elements of our worship are not commodities chosen from an *à la carte* menu; rather they are tangible things laden with meaning (or not) which must be recognized if we are to take seriously the creative and immanent nature of Christ.

**It is counter-cultural:** We react to the shortcomings of our culture by embodying their sometimes counter-intuitive alternatives in a manner which is pleasing to God, rather than comfortable or familiar to us.

**It is the work of the people:** The structure, motivation, and sheer existence of this Early Service emerged from the community and has been nurtured and sustained by the Holy Spirit through the efforts of many. Each week, the congregants participate tangibly in the preparation and execution of worship.

At its best, our worship draws our thoughts, actions, and our whole being above ourselves and directs them towards He who creates us anew daily. Peculiar words and music are chosen to lift us up above our individuality, above a casual “hello”, and into the Body of Christ, focused on the worship of Him. This cosmos is not our home, but it is pregnant with the coming Kingdom, a sense of which our worship is intended to evoke.

I pray that you will read this in the spirit in which it was written: as a thanksgiving for the things we have. This is the testimonial of a surprise inheritor of a new but grand tradition, and I give humble thanks. In peace,