

Worship with abandon (Hebrews 10:19-25)

This Hebrews text is a word crafted for a specific people by a caring preacher.

by [Otis Moss III](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

I love the act of worship. Like anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston, I view worship as an interconnected holistic activity committed to engaging the divine. Worship in my tradition goes beyond the boundaries designated by Sunday activity, but as theologian Howard Thurman states, worship is one of the trunkline ideas of existence—as central to who we are as human beings as the trunk is central to a tree. Worship is the engagement with the divine by beings who at best catch only a glimpse of what they desire to see. Every day we struggle to live in harmony with the divine. Every day we struggle to play the correct notes of the composition authored by God. Every day we struggle to learn the right steps of the divine dance taught by God. But once a week we worship, and in worship we encounter God in a different way and on a different level.

As a pastor I am privileged to witness people engaging in the act of worship. One morning an elder in our congregation was worshipping with reckless abandon. It was as if she were possessed and made drunk by a multitude of joyous and reverent angels. Her body became an instrument for a composition that the rest of us could only faintly hear. She took hold of every song and prayer as if each word held the secret of life and was the key to entering the holy of holies. She shouted, cried and talked back to the preacher with an urgency rarely seen in our tradition. Even with our strong Pentecostal proclivities and our tradition of call and response, there was something different about the nature and flavor of her worship. I was blessed to have the opportunity to speak with this elder later. What she said delighted and stunned me. “I grab hold of worship so hard because it may be my last time!” What if we always worshiped, sang, prayed, read, hugged, laughed and meditated as if it were the last time?

The writer of Hebrews, whom Thomas Long calls “preacher,” is concerned with the act of worship in community. Our lectionary reading is from the mysterious and

misunderstood word of encouragement or sermon titled Hebrews. The key to getting at this text is to engage it as a sermon and not as a pastoral letter. It is rooted in homiletics, speech, metaphor and movement of the heart—not in simple instruction or doctrine formation. This is a word crafted for a specific people by a caring preacher.

Our text is a brief portion of a larger sermon. The preacher has completed his run on the power of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice and on how we as God's children are forgiven through Christ. The preacher is now ready to engage the community in a new point about worship. "Therefore, my friends" (NRSV), also translated as "brothers and sisters," is the preacher's call for collective worship.

Christ, the "high priest" of worship, made it possible for the worshiper to have direct access to the essence of the divine. The preacher tells the community that we have entered a new age of worship in which we have access to God in the same manner as the elder I described earlier. We don't need to go through middlemen, but we become priests who must carefully engage the holy. The preacher goes on to talk about the ritual of baptism and its importance in the life of a worshiping community. He wants the community to know that our salvation is rooted in Christ and that the ritual of baptism is central to understanding our salvation. The water ritual of purification and rebirth challenges us to think on a deeper level about baptism and about how the ritual creates community.

The unknown preacher continues in the text by moving us to a celebrative moment of hope. We are to hold on to hope, but what does hope mean for a congregation like this? This community is surrounded by despair and struggling to maintain a sense of balance as other variations of the faith compete for dominance, while Roman power is pressing its finger upon the church. This is more than an eschatological yearning; this is worship with a deep sense of urgency. The subject of hope is not an idea, but a survival theology. Without this hope in Christ and belief in the transformation of the world, the congregation can easily give in to despair.

Eddie Glaude, professor of religion and African-American studies at Princeton University, speaks of this idea when he proposes that the African gift to America is to have taught the nation how to live in tragedy and not fall into despair. Tragedy still wanders around this New Testament community, but the great hope lifted in this text allows its members to face the tragic with one foot rooted in hope. Like the elder who abandoned everything to catch a glimpse of the divine, these people are challenged to worship as if it is their last time.