

# *In the Middle of a Living Parable*

*Rob Weber*

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watching in various ways  
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Some simply observe.  
Still others long to know  
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Christians are doing.*

**I**t happened to me on a beautiful spring morning at the Mount Nebo Baptist Church in upper Manhattan. The window of history and current life cracked open enough for me to feel the fresh breeze of God’s Spirit—on the move.

My wife, son, and I were on vacation in New York City. We took in some shows, did touristy things, and spent an afternoon at Ellis Island, where I read a letter to my twelve-year-old son written by my Swedish grandfather just days after his immigration to the U.S. in the early 1900s. We also wanted to visit a church with some of the powerful Gospel music we had heard so much about, so we signed up for a Spirituals and Gospel brunch tour. On Sunday morning we were taken to several places and we learned some of the history, struggles, and accomplishments of Harlem. When church time rolled around, we were taken to the Mount Nebo Baptist Church.

I was working on a couple of video projects on worship and American history, so I was seeking permission to videotape the music portion of the service at Mount Nebo. The tour guide introduced me to one of the deacons, explaining that I was a preacher from out of town and that I would like to tape a portion of the service to use in an upcoming project. The deacon immediately whisked me up the back staircase of the church to offices on the third floor. I waited in the outer office as he talked with the other deacons and an interim pastor (filling in for their former pastor who had recently died). The deacons welcomed me, and I was introduced to all those gathered in the office as the “visiting preacher.” We circled, joined hands, and prayed.

The deacon led me downstairs to the door. Then things got really interesting! Evidently, the person who passed my information to the deacons neglected to convey the part about my wanting to have permission to video tape part of the service. The only information that was passed on was that I was a visiting preacher. I discovered this omission only as the door to the sanctuary was opened, and I was instructed to go in and sit on the chancel with the others. With that, I was swept into the front of the huge old sanctuary. Now it was too late to clarify or ask questions. What could I do? I went in and sat down in the large ornate wooden chair to which I

had been directed. It was a strange experience. I was in a worship attitude and yet I was both analyzing and being analyzed. People in the congregation (predominantly African American Southern Baptist) were looking at me and wondering who I was and what I was doing on the chancel. When I was introduced as “visiting preacher, the Rev. Dr. Rob Weber from Shreveport, Louisiana,” they seemed to relax a little. I, however, did not relax.

In fact, I became extremely attentive. Checking the bulletin for information about the sermon or the scripture for the day, I found none listed. The message portion of the worship order reported no title or scripture, but simply read, “Visiting Preacher.” I thought, “This has got to be a dream. This is too strange for reality.” But I didn’t wake up. My adrenalin started to pump. One of the processors in my brain began searching for scripture and sermon ideas, and the other scanned the congregation and the room for any signs as to who these people were and what might be part of their congregational texture, just in case I was asked to share something.

As I inspected the architectural details of my surroundings, I discovered that the building had been used by at least two other faith communities. The designs in the stonework told me that it was originally constructed as a Jewish synagogue. There was also evidence in the frescoes painted around the stained-glass windows of its use as a Catholic worship center. Now it was an African-American, gospel music, Southern Baptist church in Manhattan, and the people were alive and singing.

Clear traditions were present. The announcements focused on the communal activities of the church body. They expressed a great love for the former pastor. There was a true respect for the position of the clergy. They were looking towards the celebration of the church anniversary and remembering the years of service to the community—even in difficult times. They had specific ways of making room for the guest, the visitor, and the stranger. Most importantly, they were engaged in worship of the God who is transcendent, yet present. They expected commitment and transformation of the participants and displayed concern for hope, justice, and renewal of life beyond the walls of the church.

I had come with a tour group made up of visitors from all over the world. The tour groups (so as not to be a disturbance to the worship service) were seated in the large three-sided balcony that stretched

around the top of the sanctuary. My wife and son were up there somewhere, wondering what had happened to me and why I was on the chancel. And as I sat there on that vibrating chancel (drums, bass, B-3 organ, guitar, piano, and so many dynamic voices), not knowing whether I would be called on to preach, pray, or do a liturgical dance, I realized that I was in the middle of a living parable.

*Our collective historical amnesia has allowed us to experience a historical and temporal isolation, which leads to a belief that ours is the one true way of worship. We mistakenly assume that the nature of Christian worship is permanence rather than flux and that we are the defenders of the true way.*

The congregation had deep historic roots and a contemporary expression. It was standing on the shoulders of both the Jewish and Catholic traditions and was now, with passion and commitment, living out its own witness to the story of faith. All around the balcony were eyes and ears. People from all over the world were looking at the activity of worship, partly for entertainment, partly for other reasons. I could see it in the eyes of those who observed. Some were quite distanced and analytical. Others were looking with great interest and seemed to want to enter the experience as participants. The gallery was watching to

see the authentic presentation of the life of faith. They were looking in from the outside, seeing the faithful unfolding of the expression of the ancient story. With all of this happening, I was left wondering what the Word from the Lord might be.

Soon enough, I realized that my place on the chancel was simply the way this particular congregation honored the office of pastor. When pastors (even from other denominations) attended, they gave them a place on the chancel. I was relieved, and I was thankful for the experience.

While I was not able to share my experience in worship that morning with those who were gathered there, perhaps there is a Word for those of us who provide leadership in worshipping congregations across the world.

We gather to worship week after week, singing, praying, and listening to scripture and the message proclaimed—in many cases unaware of the crowd of onlookers and what our worship says to them. “Tourists” from outside the church exist in the balconies of our sanctuaries and in the balconies of our daily lives, watching in various ways and for various reasons. Some look on for entertainment. Some simply observe. Still others long to know if there is any truth to the reality we represent in worship, and if so, what it means for them. So many people don’t know what it is that we Christians are doing. Sometimes, I think that many of us have lost touch with what it is that we are doing as well.

We Christians seem to have a collective historical amnesia. We have some disconnected information that reminds us that there has been a passing of time, an evolution of the church from the days of the sacrificial offerings of Abram, through the Tabernacle in the wilderness, the Temples on the mountains, and the birth of the synagogues in the Diaspora. Worship in the Christian community has continued to evolve in recognizable ways, creating distinct forms of diverse worship in a changing world: Early church, Eastern Orthodox, Early Roman Catholic, Reformation, Protestant Free Church, Early African-American, Pentecostal, Liturgical Renewal, Charismatic, Praise and Worship, Blended, Seeker, Emerging, Multifaceted, and Multicultural. Our collective historical amnesia has allowed us to experience a historical and temporal isolation, which leads to a belief that ours is the one true way of worship.

We mistakenly assume that the nature of Christian worship is permanence rather

than flux and that we are the defenders of the true way (whatever way that happens to be for us). The Church is good at this. It seems to come, most of the time, out of righteous motivation. We are passionate about our faith, and we want to be defenders of the faith that has claimed our hearts and lives. We can, however, develop blinders and engage in practices that are less than kind, less than hospitable, and less than Christian. In the 300s, Gregory of Nyssa experienced several particularly charged

and conflicted council meetings where people tried to sort out the foundations of the faith. He was the leader of the Roman Church during a time of enormous social change. Seeing the tension and the conflict over particulars, he wrote, "Concepts are only idols; only wonder comprehends anything. People kill one another over idols. Wonder makes us fall to our knees."

These words could be restated for our current discussion: "Worship forms can be made into idols, only wonder comprehends

anything. People kill one another over idols. Wonder (true worship) makes us fall to our knees."

The issue isn't how old your church is or what it is that you're doing right or wrong. Instead, these questions might be asked: Is it faithful? Is what the worshipping community is doing aligned and designed so that those beyond are called and welcomed? Is the transcendent and immanent God being honored and encountered? Are lives being transformed by the encounter? In other words, is it real? Does it connect? Does it work? Is it making disciples and creating a loving and transformed community of God followers?

I hear the voices of many who have become weary of the conflicts over worship forms that have, in one way or another, become idols. I hear the voices rising from those who are ready to move together, even in diverse ways, into a deeper experience of transformational and redemptive wonder. The writers who have contributed to this issue of *Circuit Rider* are such people. These writers are from different backgrounds, different size churches, and from different areas of the country. They are leaders who have great faith, commitment to the church, and integrity. The worship taking place in the congregations they serve is a palate of rich diversity. Some of the articles are more theoretical and reflective, some provide fresh and practical ideas for use in your church, some share in the age-old process of telling the story: "Here is where we were, here is what happened to us, and here is where we are now." I invite you to step into their experiences, listen to their words, and open yourself to the fresh wind that welcomes unity amidst diversity. This fresh wind of worship honors the richness of tradition, and yet is open to the God who says, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:19a (NIV). □

**Rob Weber is Senior Pastor and Founder of Grace Community United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. He is the author of several books, including:**



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