God must surely have a great sense of humor or why on earth would He put up with the likes of you and me? I’ve quoted you my favorite religious joke before, but here it is again:

Picture it, God is drawn in this cartoon as a sort of pear-shaped stick-man blob with slashes for eyes, nose, mouth, arms and legs. Well, it’s as good as any representation because the Bible tells us that God is Spirit. Anyway, God is sitting on the edge of a cloud, legs crossed, reading the Bible and says, “I’ve been misquoted.”

Marva Dawn who holds a Ph.D. in Christian ethics and the Scriptures from Notre Dame University and teaches in both Vancouver, Washington, and Vancouver, British Columbia, wrote a fascinating book under the title Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: a Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time almost twenty years ago. As a theologian, educator, and musician she shares some of the best insights on worship I have ever read, and today I begin a series of sermons on worship based largely on her book and my experience as a long-time church musician, liturgical historian, and now pastor. And I do so in the hopes that we might find a new vitality in the various elements of our worship life as twenty-first century Christians.

The renowned G.K. Chesterton wrote these words in 1906:

O God of earth and altar, in mercy hear our cry;  
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;  
the walls of gold entomb us, the words of scorn divide;  
take not Thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of pen and tongue;  
from all the easy speeches that satisfy the throng;  
from sale and profanation of honor and the word;  
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good God.
The great contemporary theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it this way, “The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed.” Dr. Dawn says that “in a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God’s Word, rightly read and heard, will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness.”

I’m so glad that we use the Common Lectionary readings in our worship and that you have historically allowed those who preach in this pulpit to call it as they see it. In recent weeks, I have heard more than once and from people whom I admire so much that at least some of my preaching has struck a nerve, and it always amuses me that from time to time someone says to me, “I felt you were preaching directly to me!” Well, it should always be that way to every one of you, because I know in my heart that if any sermon I preach does not preach directly to me, then it not likely have anything to say to you either.

So, if I’m to have anything useful to say about worship, we must begin by looking at God’s Word and the preaching thereof, for worship that does not shake us to the very roots of our souls misses the mark very, very widely. How can we listen to the Word of God read or preached and not somehow be shaken up — killed as Dr. Dawn puts it?

God must be both the subject and the object of preaching if preaching is to be a valid part of our worship. So often, particularly in the Baptist tradition, preaching has been to convince the unbeliever either to accept Christ as Savior or to accept the ways of Christ as the key to Christian living. Both are important to becoming and living as disciples of Christ. But preaching must also keep God as its center by telling the stories of faith so well that God’s invisible presence becomes visible, so that we can catch sight of God’s intervention in the past and in the present. How can we hear for the first or the fiftieth time about the parting of the Red Sea and not be stunned by God’s providing a way out of sure destruction if we will only follow His direction? How can we hear again and again about Martha and Mary without being reminded of our own efforts to entertain the Lord
without ever hearing what He has to say? How can we read about the call and service of the great women of both the Old and New Testaments and not understand that God calls both women and men into the ministry? How can we hear about Christ’s healing of the sick and the lame and indeed his feeding of the hungry as we have in today’s Gospel lesson without understanding that we, too, are called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, visit the lonely, honor the children with the gifts that they bring, and help those who cannot help themselves? How, indeed, can we hear the Word of God and not be slain by its truth?

I’m sure my preaching or that of any other preacher would be far better received if we would just stick to the program, preach what people want to hear: comfort to the comfortable, cheer to the cheerful, wealth to the wealthy, acceptance to the acceptable, in short, faith to the faithful or salvation to the saved. But do we need to be reminded yet again that the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword? Shall we listen only to what we want to hear, or shall we hear God speak his Word of discomfort to our comfortableness, sadness to our contrived cheerfulness, poverty of soul in the midst of our wealth, rejection by those whose acceptance is based on being just like us? “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion” the Bible reminds us. If worship and preaching do not rouse us out of our poverty of soul, out of our pangs of spiritual hunger, out of our unconcern for those less fortunate than ourselves, out of our willful sin against God and one another, then how can we say we have been touched by the God of mercy, of justice, and of love? Only when we look squarely in the face of almighty God and fall on our face before God can we claim to have truly worshipped. And the job of the preacher, then, is to proclaim those words of God so that the worshipper may hear the Word of God.

The trouble with our modern-day worship, particularly with some of its so called contemporary manifestations of praise and worship, is not that the Word is overlooked in liturgy or in preaching, but that the Word is left opened on the altar but never opened in the heart, read before the congregation but never relayed to the world around us, highly regarded but seldom read, let alone incorporated into our daily living.
Two of my relatives are in hospice care, one with Alzheimer’s and the other with cancer. At least two of our members are chaplains to those in such care, and the statisticians tell us that some 29 percent of U.S. citizens are providing care for a disabled, aged or chronically ill family members or friends. Hospice teams often recommend that the patient’s bed be placed in a public area of the house so that family and friends must accept that their loved one is dying. Such an arrangement means that dying gets taken up into living. Whatever else is going on around the patient—cooking, cleaning, children playing, visitors from church, meals from neighbors, even pets dashing about, keep the family’s attention focused on more than the grief that accompanies the patient’s last days—days which are no less physically and emotionally challenging, but a lot of laughter and life can happen in such a household, moments of grace as precious as bread from heaven.

Now, maybe the words which we read from John’s Gospel just a few moments ago may “kill” us even more. Like the hospital bed in the living room, Jesus’ words draw our attention to what truly matters and help us see beyond the obvious. The people in John’s day were much more focused on the obvious miracle of Christ turning just a few loaves and fish into enough to feed a large crowd, so much so that they had completely overlooked what he was now having to tell them more forcefully— that He was the Bread of Life and those who partook of this bread, of his sacrifice for their salvation, would never hunger again spiritually. We need to be reminded that when we have all the bread or anything else that we need, we too easily forget how to see the signs of God, or even to look for them. The good preacher will always call us to see these signs.

Jesus is the true Bread of Heaven that draws us to the reality that is before us. Dying is not only about death, and bread is not only about a good meal. Worship is not only about praising the Living God, it is also about dying to self that we might truly live in Christ. May our worship always reach out in that spirit to the true Spirit without ever dumbing down.

AMEN.