

Shaped by Gathering

That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

Hebrews 2:11b-12 (quoting Psalm 22:22)

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. Luke 4:14-16

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. John 5:1

Jesus habitually attended weekly Sabbath synagogue meetings (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6; 13:10). The synagogue functioned as a community center throughout the week, but on the Sabbath it was a place of prayer, Scripture reading and teaching. Jesus participated in the weekly communal life of the people of God.

Jesus celebrated the mighty acts of God at the festivals in Jerusalem (John 2:13, 23; 5:1; 7:14; 10:22; 11:55). Jesus joined other believers for the priestly rituals of sacrifice, praise and prayer in the temple. He ate the Passover lamb, prayed in the temple, and discussed the kingdom of God with the people and their leaders. Jesus participated in the communal life of Israel.

In community—both at the local synagogue and at the national temple—Jesus communed with his brothers and sisters through word (teaching), table (sacrificial meals), prayer, and praise. In the temple he stood with his brothers and sisters to hear the reading of the Torah. He listened to the praises of the Levitical choir that reverberated through the temple courts. He watched the sacrificial rituals and ate with his community at God’s table. In the synagogue he repeated the benedictions, said the prayers and listened to the reading of Scripture. He was both student and teacher at the synagogue. Jesus entered the presence of God at the temple with thousands and prayed with tens and hundreds in the synagogue. Jesus worshipped the Father with his brothers and sisters.

This communal life rehearsed the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel. As a participant, Jesus was shaped by this hearing and rehearing of God’s redemptive work in history. Again and again Jesus renewed his mission, remembered his identity, and communed with fellow-believers as he stood for prayer and praise in the both the temple and synagogue.

This communal life was no mere addendum to his mission nor was it incidental to his faith. It was an intricate part of his spirituality. Participation in the larger community is an anticipation of the community that surrounds the throne of God. Indeed, it is more than an anticipation, it is a foretaste—an actual participation—in that heavenly assembly. Our earthly assemblies are participations in the heavenly reality; to gather here is to

assemble there. To praise God in the midst of the congregation here is to stand before the face of God there.

Assembling before the face of God is not the by-product of God's salvation or our solitude with him, it is actually the goal of God's creative and redemptive work. God celebrates his victory over sin and death by gathering his people around him. When we assemble, we celebrate that victory with God.

This is the experience of Jesus himself. As he hung on the cross, he felt forsaken as the darkness enveloped him. God himself mourned as Jesus lamented, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" But embedded in the lament is also a hope, an expectation. Jesus hoped in God's redemption; he knew God would deliver him. Jesus' lament is the first verse of Psalm 22, and that lament also cries out for rescue and salvation (22:21). Jesus expects to again stand in the midst of the congregation of God's people and praise the Father. He will declare the name of God to his brothers and sisters as he testifies about God's redemption (22:22). In the assembly Jesus will celebrate his deliverance and the victory over sin and death.

The preacher of Hebrews encourages his hearers that Jesus is honored to call us his brothers and sisters and even now stands in the midst of the assembly to declare the praise of God. As we assemble and sing God's praises, Jesus sings with us. He stands at the center of the assembly to declare the victory and praise the Father. When we assemble, we gather around him and follow him in celebration and praise. Wherever two or three are gathered together, Jesus is present with them (Matthew 18:20).

Questions for Discussion:

1. What did you find interesting about the habits of Jesus in terms of gathering with his larger community?
2. Why do you think this was important to Jesus? How did it shape him as a human being?
3. How does the use of Psalm 22 on the lips of Jesus and in Hebrews 2 give you a vision for what assembling (gathering) means?
4. What is your experience of assembly? What does it mean to you?
5. What is the function of the assembly for the people of God today?