After a year and a week of sheltering-in-place amidst fear, somewhere over 500,000 deaths, and untold injuries due to the coronavirus pandemic, the notion of “dying to live” is not a metaphor. We feel in our bones a deep affliction, a deep desire to reach out and touch life, real life, real meaning and real goodness. We are done with deceptions and preoccupations. We are tired of reruns and other amusements that keep us checked out of our lives. We want to live. We are dying to live.

And so we come to worship over YouTube, because, if we are honest with ourselves, there is something to this thing. Not YouTube, per se, but worship. For over a year we have made-do with pre-recorded services, Facebook Live events, and perhaps a few unofficial moments of praise in our homes because there is something to this act of worship.

The worship of the living God is not something of obscure irrelevance. It is not a relic or a performance empty of significance. It is an act of glory, of lifting, of raising high the Name of God. In the process, it is also a divine transformation, a lifting, and a glorification of us into the likeness of God’s Son, Jesus the Christ.

But what does it mean to glorify God? What does this divine transformation look like? What does it mean for us to be lifted and glorified into the likeness of Christ?

The good news is, we’re not alone in these wonderings.

In our gospel reading today, we hear that even Jesus felt troubled about the ramifications of giving glory to God. Worship, as it turns out, is an honest act, but it is no simple thing.

Worship costs us everything.

Speaking of costs, last week my co-residents and I were sitting around on Resident Row talking about tithing, like ya do. (Please don’t freak out, this is not a stewardship sermon!) Well, this is going to embarrass the Reverend Ashley Robinson to no end, but what came out of that conversation about
money and what to do with it was one of the most beautiful explications of worship I have ever heard.

I’m not going to be able to say it word for word, but Ashley said we bring our tithes and offerings to God not because we owe it to God or because God needs it back. We bring our currency to God as an act of worship – of aligning ourselves to God, of aligning our being with God’s being. And she mentioned “open hands – giving with open hands.”

“Letting go of our own expectations of what our money can do in our own hands is an act of worship.”

“Likewise, giving songs, prayers, dances and words openly and in community with open hands, letting go and letting them thrive in the world is, in a sense, letting our individual expectations die so that something else might thrive.”

We bring what we are to God in celebration, gratitude and awe, and in so doing, our very selves are lifted and attuned to God’s way and truth. In worship we lay ourselves down and are lifted to life.

(That’s right. All that happened sitting around a campfire on a Tuesday afternoon. The Spirit is alive and at work in Wilshire’s residency program, y’all.)

It’s beautiful, what Ashley said, that in worship we both surrender ourselves to God and receive ourselves anew. We die, in a sense, and we rise. On a personal level this is astounding. No wonder we keep coming back and repeating the process, going farther up and deeper into grace.

In our gospel text today, though, we see that this is not just for us. Worship is not just a personal act of devotion.

A group of Greek outsiders want to see Jesus. They’d come to town to worship, already beginning to trust God in their hearts; “sir, we would see Jesus,” they said.

In response Jesus reveals to his disciples that it is time for the truth to be revealed for all the world, not just their religious group. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be
lifted up and glorified, which we know alludes to his coming death on a cross and to his resurrection to eternal life that will be for all people.

There is something that both attracts and repels in the stories and metaphors Jesus uses.

Unless a seed dies it cannot bear fruit. Yes, we get that one, that makes sense – but what about the seed? Do we think the seed likes the idea of transforming into something else? Fruit sounds great, but the process sounds iffy. And what is this about losing our lives?

That’s what’s got Jesus troubled about worship and giving glory to God.

He doesn’t want to die. “My heart is troubled,” he says, “What should I say, Father, to save me from this hour?” Jesus doesn’t want to face the final transformation, but he trusts his Father. This will not be in vain; he seems to know it for sure. This death will mean something for everyone.

So, all of this gets tied up in the matter of worship, of dying to self and being lifted to life eternal. Worship is an act of trust that the transformation waiting on the other side is worth it. Worship is an act of trust that God is good.

I don’t want to undersell how terrifying this act of trust can be, beloveds. When Jesus is lifted up on the cross, we are both attracted and repelled. In the act of worship, we see the truth of life. There are no more lies or deceptions. No more amusing anecdotes or fluff stories. In worship there is only what is real about us and what is real about God. Both the wonder of our being together and the horrors of what we can do.

Simone Weil was a French philosopher, mystic and activist who lived and died in the early twentieth century. She was born to an affluent family who believed in her. From that foundation of love and support, Simone went boldly into the world and made herself acquainted with the horrors of what humanity could do. She forsook comforts in order to stand in solidarity with the working poor and organized against the regimes of individualism, consumerism and Naziism. She wrote and connected ideas and people to the realities of life no one wanted to see. For years she fasted, finding it immoral to eat more than her poorest neighbors. She ultimately died a seemingly senseless death because of malnourishment and fatigue.
Hers is a story that both attracts and repels, and, honestly, there is enough in her theology and philosophy to attract and repel both. But that’s what makes it sound so awfully familiar.

On the process we call worship, Simone wrote this:

“The beauty of the world is the mouth of a labyrinth. The unwary individual who on entering takes a few steps is soon unable to find the opening. Worn out, with nothing to eat or drink, in the dark, separated from his dear ones, and from everything he loves and is accustomed to, he walks on without knowing anything or hoping anything, incapable even of discovering whether he is really going forward or merely turning round on the same spot. But this affliction is as nothing compared with the danger threatening him. For if he does not lose courage, if he goes on walking, it is absolutely certain that he will finally arrive at the center of the labyrinth. And there God is waiting to eat him. Later he will go out again, but he will be changed, he will have become different, after being eaten and digested by God. Afterward he will stay near the entrance so that he can gently push all those who come near into the opening.”

In worship we dare the labyrinthian inner courts of our hearts so that we may be transformed by the God waiting to know us.

And to be known by God is to be made different – as terrifying as that may seem.

Can we trust this God? The one who both attracts and repels? The one who comforts and terrifies? The one who asks we die to live? Shall we trust this Love?

On her hardest days, Simone Weil was often known to recite George Herbert’s seventeenth century poem Love III quietly to herself:

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back Guilty of dust and sin. But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack From my first entrance in, Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here: Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Let us take the risk, dear ones, and draw near to the one who has already drawn near to us. And may our transformation mean grace for the world.

Amen.

Worship is daring and costly, but Love does not leave us hungry. At the heart of Jesus’ invitation to come and die is his promise of Life Eternal.

And that doesn’t begin, beloveds, only in our mortal passing. To be present to God, to give God our attention, to align our gifts and energies toward God, TO WORSHIP is to touch the Eternal Now.

It is also to dare touch the thing that scares us the most. In worship we remember Jesus’s final transformation, his body lifted high on a cross, a display of the very worst we could do. And in worship we are we are touched by the Love that did not forsake him even then.