Years ago my sister-in-law started going to a Pentecostal church and decided that the rest of us needed to go to one as well. In her pursuit of this end she would send us cassettes of their church’s praise band playing their various hits. Now for those of you under 25, a cassette was a sealed plastic unit containing a length of audiotape, wound on a pair of spools, for insertion into a recorder or playback device. They were pretty dope in their day. Anyway, I remember one of these cassettes contained a song called, “I feel like praising Him.” The lyrics consisted of mainly this phrase being repeated over and over again with slight variations of tempo and cadence. Whenever I heard this song I always thought “Well, why don’t you actually praise him instead of telling me that you feel like doing it.” I have since learned that telling the audience what you are thinking about doing is a common theme in this genre of music. There are songs with names like, “Come now is the time to worship,” “Here I am to Worship” and “I Could Sing of your Love Forever.” They all seem to warn you that at any moment they could break out into some hard-core worship and praise, which I guess makes these songs more of a warning. Historically speaking, I have tended to mock these types of songs, but I have to say that as I was tying to figure out what to preach on I had a bit of sympathy for the vagueness found in the lyrics. And the reason for this started with our reading from The Revelation to John. It reads, “Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.’” So just in case it was not clear from the reading, the reason it gave me sympathy was because we hear of those who have come through the great ordeal worshiping night and day. But the passage leaves out how they were actually carrying out the act of worship. Which made me ask the question what does worshiping night and day look like? Did they have their hands in the air, did they have that earnest expression on their faces that can sometimes be confused with constipation or was it something else? I really don’t know and I think this may be why the writers of praise songs so often speak of worship as a future event, because when you do you do not have to define what is actually going on. It is like the trick I used to use on vocabulary tests in 7th grade when I was asked to use a word like obstreperous in a sentence and would write, “My friend Kathy knows what the word obstreperous means.” And so the question is we know we should worship and we know that those in heaven seem to spend a lot of time in worship but what exactly do we do when we are worshiping?

In thinking about this question I came to realize that it might be a difficult to answer partly because it is framed in the wrong way. What I mean by this is I am not sure if you can say it looks a particular way like you would say an action like throwing a baseball looks a certain way. And I say not to avoid the question but to point out that worship may not always involve a physical action. Yes, worshiping can involve singing or praying aloud. It may involve kneeling or standing but I would argue that central to worship is a focus on God.

I heard a story years ago about from a college professor talking about how traditional Protestantism and Catholicism do not necessarily translate into good TV. To illustrate his point he said that when EWTN (the Catholic network) first went on the air it opened with a shot of a priest (which I guess makes sense). The priest welcomed everyone to the new network and explained a bit of what it was all going to be about. After that introduction he then said let’s begin with a few moments of silent prayer. And so for the next several moments the camera lingered on a priest with his head bowed, silently praying. I have never checked if that story is true or not, but when has that ever stopped someone when searching for a sermon illustration? What I think it points out is how worship is not necessarily something that you can see. I assume that this priest was fervently praying to God, but the rest of us could not see it. And that is okay. Remember what Jesus said, “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” In this passage Jesus seems to imply that the less you are seen looking like you are worshiping the better, which may be a good thing for us Episcopalians. But of course it is not that easy. It is not enough to say that the less you look like you are worshiping the better Christian you are. And the reason this is so is because we have to be doing the internal work and this is the work that is much harder. Throwing your hands up in the air and singing, “I Feel Like Praising Him” is not hard; it might be embarrassing for us liturgical types but it is not hard. Focusing our entire being on the contemplation and love of God is hard. And the reason it is so hard is because so much in ourselves and in the world fights against it. Because of television and whatever else most of us have the attention span of a goldfish and so sitting in quiet contemplation is extremely difficult because we have been bred to be diversion junkies always in need of our next stimulation fix. But for the God who says, “Be still and know that I am God” stimulation may not be where we will find him. And when we have a world wired to constantly tell us that something very important is happening, that demands our attention right this second, escaping from it can be very difficult. But the worshipful person needs to filter this out to draw their attention to the God of the universe.

Now and then when I have been on vacation and away from email I have noticed a rather funny thing. As a scroll through my emails I will see a very urgent message telling me that if I get this, the person desperately needs me to call them. As I continue scrolling I will inevitably come across an email from the same person that says never mind, they figured it out. To worship God we need to be able to separate ourselves out from the screaming that says you need to look at this right now and instead turn our focus and our gaze towards God. Because those things that demand our attention may not be quite as important as they purport to be. Ultimately the question of whether or not we are worshiping God is something that can be answered only by us and by God. There are no physical actions or phrases uttered that can demonstrate to us with 100% certainty that a person is worshiping almighty God. But the good thing about that fact is it frees us to worship God at all times and in all places. We can do it in the grocery store, driving to work or while mowing the lawn. All that it requires is God being the focus of our entire being both this day and forevermore.