

I. Advanced organizer

- A. **In the early 4th century, a massive sea change was underway in regards to religion in the Western World.** The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and officially ended the persecution of what had previously been for a few hundred years, an underground rogue sect. Christians could come out from hiding, and with the endorsement of the Emperor, they'd eventually become the state-established religion of the empire. But now that this faith was more in the open, and the Emperor himself was invested in it, **debates about what Christians actually believed about Jesus became hot topics of the day.** The biggest controversy of the day became known as the **Arian controversy**, named after one of the key players, the church leader Arius. The question under debate, was **whether Jesus was fully God, eternally equal with God the Father, or whether he was created by the Divine, and was thus subject to God, along with the Holy Spirit** (show the slide).
1. It might sound to us like a pretty heady, archaic thing to be concerned about, but at the heart of the question was whether God was ultimately a God of hierarchy and concentrated unequal power, or a God of mutuality, equity and cooperation.
  2. Anyway, Arius believed in a hierarchy within God, that Jesus was created by God and thus beneath God in power. And his point of view spread and became very popular among the common people. But how did this happen? How did he go viral? This was over a thousand years before Guttenberg invented the writing press, so the majority of people were illiterate; they weren't reading his blog posts and debating them. They couldn't watch him on youtube. No, **Arius spread his thinking about God and Jesus to the people by writing songs.** He cranked out what were thought of as very catchy tunes of the day, and he formed a band and a choir, and had singers perform his songs throughout the nights in the City of Constantinople. **The songs caught on and before long sailors were singing them on their ships. Arius' theology spread throughout the City and beyond.**
  3. Not to be outdone, the church father **Chrysostom** became frustrated and worried about these views of Arius' spreading, as he believed they were wrong, and **so he decided to try to beat Arius at his own street musician game.** Chrysostom began organizing night processions through the streets, filled with the church's own hymn singing, candles and pageantry. **So these two rival groups began their own 4th century Battle of the Bands.** Every night both groups would march through the city, singing out their understanding of the Christian faith. **Sometimes they'd actually meet in the streets and full on riots would break out.** All the conflict would eventually prompt the Emperor to call the first ecumenical Council of the church in the city of Nicea, where leaders from both schools of thought hashed out their beliefs, and eventually the group decided against Arius, decided that God was a God of equity and not of heirarchy. They produced the Nicene creed outlining their understand of the trinity (show image), which has become the foundational document outlining the understanding of God in three persons that has been embraced by almost all of the historic, global church. All of that arose out of feuding songs about faith.
- B. **Over the last several weeks we've been working through a series I'm calling, "Reconstructing Faith",** exploring the ways we need to take apart and rebuild systems of meaning around our understanding and practice of spirituality.
1. We've talked about the identity of God. We've talked about the Bible. Today we're focusing on a portion of our devotional life, **specifically, the practice of musical worship.** As was demonstrated by that 4th century story, the songs we sing about faith can really matter. Whether you are a musician or not, music can play a powerful role in shaping your understanding and practice of faith. But that can be complicated. Each week we've been

hearing from someone in our community about something they're deconstructing and reconstructing. Deconstructing and reconstructing around this has been a major theme for Alisa, who has agreed to share her story with us today, it's such a core story for her, and I think really relevant to this topic for us, that I've asked her to go ahead and take a little more time than we've done for these so far.

a) Alisa shares for around 10 minutes.

2. Perhaps you can resonate in some way with Alisa's story. If you've been in faith community for any period of time, you've likely have had experiences with musical worship, and **hopefully those have at times felt freeing, felt liberating, felt honest, maybe it took you out of yourself into something bigger that was really helpful.**

a) But I know a **number of us have also, like Alisa, had other experiences too.**

Experiences where we've felt like we couldn't bring our whole self into worship, like we had to hide part of who we are. Experiences where the whole thing might have felt false, like we were being asked to sing or proclaim or to perform some sort of spiritual connectedness that we didn't really feel. Or **maybe we simply carry associations that a certain style of music brings because it reminds us of a setting in which we experienced real pain, real spiritual trauma.** And because music is powerful and kinesthetic, when we hear songs that are connected to our trauma, our body forgets in that moment that we're actually safe, it might bring us back somewhere the pain feels and raw. Maybe that makes part of us want to leave the whole practice of worshiping in song behind.

3. Here at Haven, **part of our core self-understanding is that we are trying to live into a tension of being a community that is safe, diverse, and Jesus-centered.** And inherently, there are tensions to living these values out, particularly in this practice of musical worship. **What feels unsafe to one person may be exactly what feels essential for connecting with Jesus to another.** So how do we move forward?

C. Today I want to try to start the process by considering a few things:

1. First, remembering briefly what this practice of singing in a room together is actually connected to. **What is the bigger picture that singing together is a part of?**
2. Secondly, as a Jesus-centered community, we're gonna take some time to consider what we might know about Jesus' worship practices. **What do we know about Jesus' connection to musical worship?**
3. Third, we'll take some time to consider, **"What qualities should we seek to cultivate in our own community's culture around worship in song?"**

II. First, the bigger picture:

- A. Many of us, though certainly not all, have spent time in churches where the terms "worship" or perhaps "praise and worship" have been used to describe a period of a service in which music is played on guitars and people sing. But **I want to start by reminding us that to think of worship as just people singing together in a room is unhelpfully limiting.**
- B. At Haven, sometimes we talk about being a centered-set church. This graphic helps demonstrate what I mean. We say we don't define our community by a set of black and white shared life experiences, but more that our community recognizes that all of us are journeying through life, we're all heading somewhere, and the life of faith is about being invited to orient that journey toward the divine. We think about our community as a place that gathers different people who are drawn to a shared center point we name as Jesus.
  1. And I think this is a helpful framework to keep in mind when thinking about **the idea of worship, which is really a relational activity. If our aim in the life of faith is to orient**

ourselves around Jesus and move forward in following him, then I believe worship is a helpful means for **re-orienting our vision and re-engaging the center.** (slide) Worship is the act of ascribing supreme worth to God, and recognizing that our own worth comes from our connection to the Divine. We are remembering actively that God is the end toward which we are moving.

- C. **Worship can of course take numerous forms. We see this throughout the Bible** as Israel worships through **giving of their harvest or the animals they raise for food.** They're giving back out of their resources, reminding us that giving of our time and money is an act of worship. Worship in the Bible means at times **physically expressing honor** through your body, bowing facedown, lifting hands. **It means fasting and prayer and other devotional practices practiced individually and communally.** It involves **communal participation in the rhythms of celebration and remembrance** through festivals and other gatherings. These include rituals and meals together, liturgies and readings, and yes, at times it often involves poetry and music, singing, and dancing. All of the is what we mean when we talk of worship.
- D. So that's the bigger picture of what we're talking about when we consider worship. It's helpful to remember when we think about the musical portion of what we do here, about what it is that musical exercise is a part of. The reason we make space isn't to have something cool or to emulate a coffeehouse or a rock show, but its actually to enter into an ancient practice that serves as a medium for engagement with the divine, to help us reengage the center we're moving towards, connecting with one another and with God.

### III. **So what about Jesus? What do we know about his participation in corporate worship, particularly worship in song?**

- A. It's true we don't have stories of Jesus pulling out a guitar and going all hipster rock star, forming a band with the twelve. But we do see pictures of him **participating fully and regularly in the Jewish life of faith**, and that meant participating in synagogue regularly, attending festivals in Jerusalem throughout the year, from a young age being a part of the caravans that headed from the Galilee up to the temple in Jerusalem. And as these observant Jews gathered for shabbat service in the synagogue or caravanned toward Jerusalem, it was customary for them not to do those things quietly and meditatively, they did them musically. They did them in song. We see Jesus as a young boy observing these rituals. We see him as an adult rabbi continuing to fully enter into them and embody them.
- B. And it's not just what we can infer seeing the habits of Jesus' Jewish life that we know that musical worship was an important part of his practice. We see in the words the gospel writers share of his, that again and again he is formed by the language of worship.
  - 1. Do you know **what book Jesus quoted from the Hebrew Bible, more than any other?**  
**The book of Psalms.**
    - a) It makes sense doesn't it? Remember from our last conversation, this isn't a time when people had their own copies of the Bible to carry around and reference. You knew scripture because as a community you heard it read, you discussed it, you talked about it, you learned portions of it by memory. And the parts you knew the most, the parts that were easiest to retain and to call upon when you needed help were the songs. The songs weren't just words they had melody, they had harmony, they had rhythm and cadence, repetition, poetry. And so you studied the psalms. You sang them together; they weren't just old poems you read out of context, they were songs of worship you sang in community, and that worship in song shaped your understanding of the faith. It gave you imagery to draw upon. It provided a foundation for your to consider and talk about who God is and what God is doing in the world.

- b) **So what kind of Psalms would Jesus have been drawing on?** What kind of songs are in the Book of Psalms? I think it's helpful to do a bit of an aside on that because it's so core to how Jesus would have worshipped. The Book of Psalms was the songbook of Israel that was made up of songs and poems written by Ancient Israelites throughout the era in which Israel was a monarchy, something like the time from 1000-500 years before Jesus. The bulk of these 150 songs fall into one of three major categories, and these categories have very distinct forms that appear again and again. **The major categories are:**

(1) **Hymns of Praise**

(2) **Psalms of Thanksgiving** (Individual or corporate)

(3) **Laments**

2. What does that mean?

- a) **Hymns of Praise** were songs celebrating the identity of God, describing who they understood God to be - their creator, their redeemer, and inviting people to praise this God in connection to that. Look at Psalm 113:

**5 Who is like the Lord our God,  
the One who sits enthroned on high,  
6 who stoops down to look  
on the heavens and the earth?  
7 He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;  
8 he seats them with princes,  
with the princes of his people.  
9 He settles the childless woman in her home  
as a happy mother of children.  
Praise the Lord. (Ps. 113:5-9)**

- b) **Psalms of Thanksgiving** were about honoring the Divine for specific things that God has done that they want to thank God for. This can be personal and it can be corporate. Here's a taste of the corporate in Psalm 66:

**5 Come and see what God has done,  
his awesome deeds for mankind!  
6 He turned the sea into dry land,  
they passed through the waters on foot—  
come, let us rejoice in him....  
(Ps. 66: 5-6,)**

- c) **Psalms of Lament** - this one is often overlooked, perhaps because a lot of Christians feel uncomfortable with them or don't know what to do with these songs, but they are a hugely vital part of the worship tradition of Israel, making up about a third of all the Psalms in the Psalter.

- (1) Lament is the primal cry of the wounded. Lament is the honest struggle. Lament is fear and anger and depression and sometimes despair. Lament asks questions that can't be easily answered. Lament invites us to sit in the dissonance of being in connection to a Divine one that we believe is Good, whose ways are right and just, and yet we face realities that are not good, experiences that are wrong and unjust.
- (2) Lament asks questions like the words of David, Psalm 13:  
**1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?**

*How long will you hide your face from me?  
 2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
 and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
 How long will my enemy triumph over me?  
 3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God.  
 Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,  
 4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
 and my foes will rejoice when I fall. (Ps. 113:1-4)*

- (3) These were the kinds of songs Jesus grew up singing. They're the kind of songs he sang with his closest friends. They're the songs they sang together in synagogue. On the long walks between villages. Heading up to Jerusalem for the festivals. Hymns of Praise, Psalms of Thanksgiving, Cries of Lament. They shape him and he reaches for them in sometimes surprising moments, particularly in the climax of the story, during the last week of his life.
3. Jesus using the Psalms
- a) He used them to speak to the Pharisees who confronted him in the temple, after Jesus had triumphantly entered the city and then made a real ruckus clearing the temple.
- (1) **14 The blind and lame came to him in the temple courts, and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the experts in the law saw the wonderful things he did and heard the children crying out in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant 16 and said to him, "Do you hear what they are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of children and nursing infants you have prepared praise for yourself?'" (Matt. 21:14-16)**
- (a) There it is, Psalm 8:2. Jesus is rooting what he has come to do in the most ancient and sacred traditions their people have. His work is calling people to worship, and far from being an embarrassing sacrilege like the Pharisees seem to imply, he pulls the Psalms out to remind these pharisees what tradition they're all a part of, and how Jesus and his followers are embodying it in a way they cannot.
- b) When Jesus is having his last supper with his followers multiple times he reaches for the psalms to ominously describe what's coming. One of the most gripping times is when he points out after washing their feet, that one of them is going to betray him (John 13:18):
- (1) ***"But this is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who eats my bread has turned against me.'*** he says, quoting Psalm 41:9, putting his experience in the tradition of lamenters before him like David.
- c) Finally, on the cross, it is the Psalms Jesus reaches for with the last breaths he has left in his broken body.
- (1) ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** (Matt. 27:46), Psalm 22, verse 1, another lament of David
- (2) ***"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"***. (Luke 23:46) Psalm 31:5, one of David's Hymns of praise, expressing trust in the Divine.
4. Why does all this matter? Because if we're looking to Jesus as a north star kind of model in our life of faith, then it's relevant when **we think about worship, that he had a vibrant worship life. He was immersed in the traditions of praying and singing the Psalms,**

and that shaped his understanding of the Divine and of himself so much that **in crucial moments** this brilliant, provocative, creative thinker who came up with mind blowing parables and completely innovative interpretations didn't freestyle it. **He used the words he had sung**, the words of his tradition, the words that felt most resonant. And they came from the community's songs.

5. I don't know about you, but **I've had moments when I've felt lately, like there are no words to express the intensity of what I'm feeling**, and yet somehow, the gift of singing has released something I couldn't release any other way.

- a) **One of these actually happened this Monday**, in the wake of last weekends deadly shooting at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. After the massacre there, I reached out to my friend Dorothy Richman who is a Rabbi and currently works for the JCC. Many of you will remember that she's spoken here a couple of times at Haven. Dorothy let me know that her and the JCC leaders were organizing an event for Monday night to gather, grieve, and sing. She said allies were welcome, and she invited me to even lead a song if I was up for it. I planned on it, but when I arrived at the event, the size of the crowd was overwhelming. There was no way I could make it to the front to lead anything, nor seeing the size of the assembly, did I feel a need to. I was grateful to gather with probably six or seven hundred people of all ages, mostly Jewish as they wept, and they prayed and they sang and sang and sang. Songs unfamiliar to me but beautiful. Songs that gave voice to the grief, the longing, the weariness that so many were feeling. It was as if everyone there had things they needed to say, to get out the sense of anger, fear, despair, but there were no words to express those feelings. Until we sang. Until we could use the words of song to speak our hearts. We sang in English, we sang in Hebrew. We sang lines from the psalms in the language they were written in. And there was something so profound and restorative, even in the midst of great grief and loss and fear, as we sang and our voices blended and separating, our breaths released in unison. Our cheeks moist from weeping. Our hearts heavy and yet hopeful to know we were not alone. I was honored to be in that space. It was a time of holy, holy song.

- IV. **So What about Haven?** If we want to recognize that we can't abandon this practice, and we want to somehow reclaim it and reconstruct an experience of worship in song that feels right for our community, how do we proceed? I want to end, not with an exhaustive answer, but to suggest a few ideas of qualities we should seek to cultivate in the culture of musical worship we are reconstructing at Haven.

**A. Worship should be honest**

1. room for lament
2. room for ambiguity
3. room for color and gray, not black and white
4. room to enter in in different ways
5. permission for each of us to be wherever we are at without a need to perform faith or participation
6. Leadership that's invitational not coercive. I'm inviting you to take a journey into connecting with God, but I'm not trying to force you, I'm not trying to manipulate you

**B. Worship should be thoughtful**

1. what we say about God matters. Our songs shape our theology.
2. being thoughtful about pronouns
3. there are metaphors for God that may have been helpful at one point in history that are problematic now. Being careful about really triumphalist images of God as a warrior, etc.

**C. Worship should be connective**

1. remind us that we are part of something bigger. Take us out of ourselves. Connect us with the people in this room, in this community, we are a part of something here, we're not just individuals coming to consume an experience tailored for us; it's not an iTunes library. This singing together connects us with another, reminds us that we are a part of creating an environment for all of us to connect with God.
  2. It's also about connecting us with something even beyond the other people in the room. Connect us with our history, with those who have come before us, with the bigger family of God we are a part of, with the people in this room, with those who will come after us
  3. we sing hymns, we sing songs from different genres, different languages
  4. all connecting us to the Divine toward which we are moving, and the others who are trying to move in the same direction too.
- D. It doesn't answer every question about what songs we should sing, what instruments we should play, what style we should lead with, how long the worship set should be. There is much more to be negotiated in constructing a healthy culture of worship in song that feels appropriate to the safe, diverse, Jesus centered community we're trying to create. But I hope this is a start. I hope that cocreating a worship space together that we all have the capacity to participate in that's honest, that's thoughtful, and that's connective will help us discern a medium for letting our journeys turn again toward the divine, reengage with the center we're pursuing, stand in the stream of song with those who have come before us and those who will follow, and be nourished by the same rich waters of expression that nourished the Jesus we follow. Amen.

**Questions for Reflection and Conversation:**

1. In what ways has musical worship enriched your experience of faith? In what ways has it been challenging?
2. How does considering Jesus' use of the Psalms impact your own thinking around musical worship?
3. Which of the three qualities Leah suggested most resonate with you? Which feel hardest to you?