

## **Not for Nothing**

Rev. John Allen

In Seminary my professor of worship was a woman named Janet Walton. Janet is a former Roman Catholic nun who had been teaching worship at Union for over three decades by the time I arrived on the scene.

She is a warm, kind, and incredibly generous person. And she takes worship very seriously.

Janet has an unfailing devotion to the idea that what happens in our worship services really matters, and really has the ability to shape the world in which we live.

It's a devotion and a passion that she passed on to countless students.

Including me.

And like any good professor there are words of Janet's that continue to echo in my ears all these years later as I am planning and preparing for these services.

And, in keeping with Janet's direct communication style, in her case it was just 2 words in particular...

Once I had planned a chapel service that was just so beautiful. The words were poetic. The music was flawless. We had dancers, and their movements were precise. The space was set up in a way that was visually quite compelling. Everything went off without a hitch.

When the postlude ended, I was floating.

I was so proud of what we had done, that I made sure to position myself in such a way that Janet would have to walk past me on her way out of the room, so that I could receive her glowing praise.

And she did. She walked right over to me.

And it was the first time I heard what I now know is her signature piece of feedback to students.

“So what?”

“So what?”

What now? That was beautiful. No doubt.

What now?

What difference does it make?

I must have looked devastated, because it didn't take long for a few older students to come over to re-assure me. “She says that every day.”

In fact, to the extent that a nearly half-century long career can be distilled down to a single phrase, I think that Janet's contribution to the field of worship might be the thousands of us who are out here in the world now who get to the end of writing a sermon, or a prayer, and read it over and ask, so what?

Through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, God told God's people:

Just as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In other words, all this stuff that we do here, it's not for nothing.

All the beauty, the poetry, the music. All the joy, the love.

It's not meant to just be a momentary experience to break up life.

Like the, the rain, or the snow. It is a moment, that comes and goes. And yet it is not for nothing. It is for a purpose. God sends it to accomplish a purpose. That something new might grow in the world beyond these walls.

My professor Janet had another phrase she was fond of. She always referred to worship as "practice for life."

She believes that we do what we do in this room in order to rehearse a way of living that we should carry with us out into the world.

So when we listen to beautiful music, it is not just to keep us entertained while the offering is being collected. It is to train us how to pay attention to all the beautiful things God has put in this world.

When we read scripture, it is not just because we like hearing familiar

stories, it is because those stories never lose their power to challenge us into a new way of living.

When we sing, it is not just because they are songs we love. We sing together to practice joining our voices as one to give voice to the heart of our faith.

When we pass the peace, it is not just to say hello to our friends, but to see what we would need to do to make a world where peace is shared not just among people in a room, but among nations, and all the people of the world, who see the image of God in each other's faces.

God's beautiful word meets our ears. But not for nothing.

Like the rain to the Earth. God's word has a purpose.

So here is a modest proposal. The next time you find yourself in a situation where you feel like you don't have your bearings. Or where

you feel like you are about to lose yourself into something that you know you shouldn't do. Or when you feel fear, or anger rising in your chest.

Take a breath. And imagine that you are here.

Imagine that you just finished singing a hymn with all your co-workers.

Or you just passed the peace with your family.

Or you just listened to the words of scripture along with everyone else stuck on the expressway with you.

Call on what you practice here. What you rehearse here.

Bring the beauty, and the challenge, and the inspiration of this place out, beyond these walls. Let your lives be noticeably transformed by what happens here.

And then come back. Come back. And sing with us some more. Pray with us again.

When I was a kid I took violin lessons. And every night, it feels like, there was a battle in my house about getting me to practice. And I confess, that on the nights when I was really just not feeling like I could bear to do it, I would go into my room, and play, rushing through the exercises and scales I had been assigned, not really caring about going back over mistakes. Skipping the hard parts and just doing the easy stuff.

And, without fail, when I showed up for my lesson on Thursday night, my teacher could tell that I had just been going through the motions.

She was kind about it. But I know she was disappointed.

So when we gather here, in this place, we need to not just get through everything as easily as we can. We need to spend some time

with the stuff that feels hard, or the things we may not agree about.

We need to sit with the stuff that makes us uncomfortable or the passages that trip us up again and again.

We need to notice our mistakes, have the courage to face them, and the willpower to fix them.

And not just so that we can make the church a little better, or a little nicer. But because we are practicing. Practicing for life. Practicing to go walk out those doors in such a way that our very lives will be a part of the healing of the world.

Building a faithful life is like any other discipline. It requires our attention. It requires us to show up, and to stick with it when things get tough.

But its not for nothing.

In fact. It is for the sake of something extraordinary.

A world transformed by love.

A vision of justice and peace.

The very work of our God.