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Perspective: 5 ways to prepare for digital worship

By Drew Tucker

So you, and many others, are now worshiping digitally because of an order from your governor to Shelter in Place, Stay at Home, Quarantine or, my personal favorite, Hoosier Hunker Down. (Well done, Indiana.) These restrictions affect not just worship but small group meetings and Bible studies, council meetings and youth group activities. Much, perhaps most, of this life during COVID-19 is digital right now.

Soon, though, the novelty may wear off.

Now that we've been sheltering in place for a month, there's a danger of losing both our connectivity to one another and our commitment to continuing this practice in these limited ways. How can you foster feelings of connection with God, with your community and with the worship experience? How can worship remain a priority for you not just in theory but in practice?

Preparation now matters more than ever. Many congregations, when they gather, hear a leader say, "Prepare your hearts and minds for worship." Now, though, we're called beyond hearts and minds. We're called to prepare hearths and selves, the physical spaces of our homes and the bodies we bring to digital worship. Below are five suggestions for magnifying your experience of digital worship.

First, though, a disclaimer: This isn't advice for how to create the best technological experience. There's value in the right sound settings, turning your microphone off, and the like, but this is about the space in which your technology is set and how to more fully engage worship in that place.

1. Set (and choose) the space.

If you're having trouble feeling like you're at worship, take a look around. Are there dirty clothes strewn across the couch? Dirty dishes on the table? Garbage bags waiting to be taken out? Don't get me wrong, those are all realities in my house! But they often distract me when I'm trying to engage in reflective and attentive worship. So we've set aside our guest bedroom as a space where we don't leave messes, where we clean and organize regularly, where we try to align the feeling of the space with the purpose of worship.

Not that God needs a tidy space, but removing distractions helps us to focus ourselves more on holy purposes. If you don't have a bedroom to spare, prioritize a corner of the kitchen table or a section of the family room to set in order, and prioritize worship for at least the time that you're planning to worship.

2. Utilize images.

Art is a vital element of worship. Since the earliest Christian gatherings, words, images and artifacts have played central roles. Of course, the words of Scripture, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, exemplify various kinds of linguistic art: poetry and narrative, song and prose, and advice. Soon, paintings, drawings and, eventually, icons became central parts of the church's worship.

Many elements, such as the altar and candlesticks, as well as the cup and plate (also known as the chalice and paten) of communion, contain types of decorating, from the simple to the ornate. For your own space, consider projecting or printing your favorite religious image that raises up community—an icon of Jesus and the disciples, for instance—to help focus you on Christ and his community. Consider hanging a cross and displaying your favorite Bible, open to your favorite passage.

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3. Remember your baptism.

One way to mark an entrance into worship is to splash yourself with holy water. Many churches place the baptismal font at the main entrance, to signify baptism's role as the traditional entrance into Christian community. Whenever I pass a font in the church, I dip my finger in the water and mark a sign of the cross on my head.

Consider, then, as you prepare for digital worship events, wetting your hand and marking your forehead with the cross of Christ. Do you have a favorite decorative bowl? Consider fusing the art and the baptismal remembrance by filling the bowl and bringing it into the space you've set aside.

4. Light up your world.

Most churches utilize candles in some way. Originally, this was the only way to light a home at night. Eventually, candles lit large temples and then catacombs for worship. With the advent of electricity, candles became more theologically useful. The lighting of candles signified God's presence, particularly in the places where the holiest things happened: around altars, pulpits and the font. One candle, the Paschal Candle, is lit to symbolize Christ's presence.

In your home-based worship space, light a candle to signify the presence of God with you, in your home. The warmth of the flame may remind you of God's comfort, and the flickering light of God's constant movement.

5. Sing it loud, say it proud!

Once worship begins, whether you're by yourself or with family, it can feel a bit awkward to join in litanies, to pray aloud or to sing along the way you would in the sanctuary with your church. Remember, though, that worship is inherently participatory.

So when you pray, pray with fervor. Let the words resonate from deep within you. When you sing, do it, as John Wesley said, "lustily, and with good courage!" (Yes, he really said that, and I agree.) Shout to the Lord with joy and passion. There's no shame in passionate worship, no matter if you're surrounded by hundreds, gathered with dozens or alone behind a screen, connected to the community through the internet.

This piece was originally published on the author's personal website.