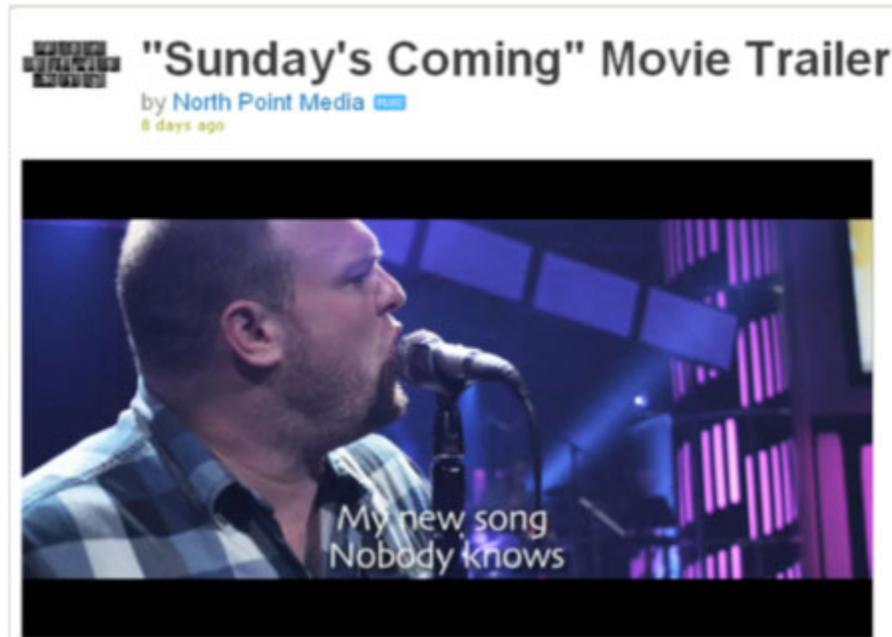


"Sunday's Coming": A Companion Ritual Analysis, Part 2



As I noted in the conclusion of [Part I](#) of this two-part series, the pattern of worship portrayed in "[Sunday's Coming](#)" is very effective and appeals to our emotional responses and how our brains process and present the world to us. When done well, it delivers exactly what it primes us to expect, and because it does that, the overall experience is a satisfying one that many people want, and some even long, to be part of again and again.

Some of my readers may be surprised to see me make such a positive assessment. After all, I've noted that the ritual portrayed here focuses almost completely on individuals, is led only by youngish white males in this particular example, is masterful at what may appear to be emotional and cognitive manipulation, and functions almost exclusively as a compelling performance by the "folks up front" for "an audience" instead of being "the work of the people" offering themselves fully to God.

What's more, where are any tangible signs linking this worship space or the people in it to any sense of church beyond themselves and their subjective experience in North American media culture in the present? Where is a cross or any other Christian symbol? Is there a physical Bible anywhere in the room? Where are the Lord's Table and the font? What about any reference to God or Jesus? In this video and in all too many cases where this kind of "seeker" model is used, many if not all of those are entirely absent.

Those critiques and questions are all fair, serious, and on target. For all those reasons, and more beside, I do not recommend what "Sunday's Coming" portrays as a good model for United Methodists or Christians generally to emulate for worship on the Lord's Day.

But because I would hope our congregations would not simply copy this model and use it as is doesn't mean it offers nothing of value. This video and the model of worship it parodies have many good things to teach us all -- worship planners, worship leaders and worshipers alike.

Here are three.

1. A powerful act of Entrance. As we noted in the previous article, "Opening song, Lights and big drums" does exactly what any act of entrance should do.

- a. **It catches attention.** People come to worship with all sorts of feelings, experiences and thoughts, some of them conflicting and few of them conducive to us being the body of Christ at worship. If we are going to start worshipping, the entrance needs to move worshipers beyond the unfocused background of all those feelings and thoughts and create a compelling focus. "Opening Song, lights and big drums" intentionally catches everyone's full attention with lights, sound, familiar music and spotlights on lots of vigorous movement on stage.

How do the opening acts of worship intentionally catch attention of people's minds and bodies where you are?

- b. **It connects all present in a common action that is bigger than themselves individually.** Ritual, in general and religious ritual in particular, across all cultures, is all about connecting people to one another and to something bigger than themselves ("religion" means "re-linking"). The sense of being connected to one another and being part of something bigger than ourselves is far more affective and bodily than it is cognitive. We "feel" connected to one another and something bigger first, and then we can think in connected and more transcendent ways. The feeling of connection and transcendence is most powerfully and directly generated by moving our bodies in connection or synchrony with one another or with something else (such as music, lights and big drums). "Opening song, lights, and big drums" generates feelings of connection to one another and something bigger through recognizable music, song, and a clearly articulated rhythm that literally synchronizes the room bodily and emotionally and with a sensory overload (loud music, powerful rhythm, lights flashing all around) that can generate what Freud described as the "oceanic sense" and what neuroscientists call ["deafferentation."](#)

How does the entrance generate bodily and affective connection with one another and with God where you are?

- c. **It directs individual and group attention to where focus needs to be for this ritual to "work."** "Opening song, lights, and big drums" uses spotlights and the biggest of the sounds, the highly amplified voice of the soloist, to direct attention to the stage and particularly to the soloist worship leader. For that ritual, as intensely focused on individual experiences as it is, that is exactly what the entrance needs to do. But if we believe worship needs to focus attention more on "God with us" than on "me and Jesus," or just me, the entrance may need to direct focus differently. How does the entrance direct the focus of worshipers in ways that enact "God with us" where you are?

2. A continuous sense of focus and flow. A strong entrance will establish focus and *start* to generate flow that maintains and then directs focus throughout the service.

The key word here is *start*. Flow and focus are both easy to lose or break and require careful design, planning and execution to retain. Moving from a powerful entrance to a stumbling welcome, a list of announcements, or a poor reading of Scripture can almost instantly drain all the energy, flow and focus from the worshipping community. In fact, it can be so demoralizing that it can actually leave people less focused and engaged than before worship began. Here are three things "Sunday's Coming" and the best of both "contemporary" and "traditional" worship do to keep a sense of flow that also keeps and directs focus exactly where it needs to go.

a. **Flow is bodily first, and so more about energy, feeling, and action than about words and texts.**

Like connection to one another and God, flow is something we *move* into (sometimes literally by moving or changing position) and *feel* emotionally and physically rather than think about in the moment. In fact, if we start to think about flow in the moment, that's probably a good sign that we've lost the flow and lost focus as well.

Because flow is so bodily, it is deeply affected by how our bodies are at the moment. If we've just been part of a major physical and emotional high, like the Entrance might be, our bodies need to rest and recover a bit before we're ready to move toward such a high again or in any different direction.

But for the flow to keep flowing and not just come to a full stop, something of the energy and feeling of what came before needs to be continued in what happens next, though in a much lower intensity so our bodies can rest. That's why the audience is seated right after "Opening Song, lights, and big drums," and without pause, "The Welcome Guy" appears and begins. He carries something of the "coolness" of the music just performed in his clothing, appearance and in the kind of upbeat but non-threatening energy he exudes with his body, though at a much less intense sound and movement than the song had done. That allows the audience to catch its breath, while retaining, invisibly, the "vibe" of energetic singing that will allow him to bring the audience to their feet again to sing "The Song That Everyone Knows."

Play through the video one more time, and you'll see the same pattern, time and again. Emotional or physical intensity is followed by release and a "resting period" that keeps the audience engaged in the same emotional sense of what came before, but with less physical intensity, while also using and leading that sense to connect to what comes next -- and almost always with few if any words or explanations.

How do you pay attention to the bodily and emotional dynamics of flow as you plan worship where you are?

- b. **"Invisible" transitions are the key to flow.** Transitions are what keep everything moving, both within elements and between them; that is, as long as you can't see or feel them! Think of it like passing the baton in a relay race, or catching the next trapeze in the air. Do it smoothly, and no one notices you were doing anything but running or flying. Do it roughly, and attention shifts to the rough transition and away from the main event. Miss it, and everything may come to a full and maybe embarrassing stop.

What do you do in planning and leading worship to make transitions as invisible as possible?

- c. **Rehearse transitions -- within elements and especially between them.** Yes, I've just given you one possible answer to the previous question! There is simply no better way to prepare for leading or enacting any element of worship or a whole service than to rehearse the transitions. And the more technology you use, or the more different things are happening in the worship space at the same time, the more transitions you have to rehearse with more people.

Where and how do you build time for rehearsal of transitions so that the flow continues to direct focus where it needs to go?

3. A powerful act of Sending. If we need an act of Entrance to focus our bodies and minds and move us decisively into worshipping our Triune God as the body of Christ, we need just as much or more an act at the end of worship that gathers up all we have done, seen, heard, smelled, touched, felt, experienced, and tasted in the course of worship and sends us out renewed by God's grace to live differently and better because of these encounters with the saints and the Holy One. God does not meet and transform us in such encounters to make us feel better, or even to feel like we can be or do better, but actually to make us better.

And not just us, but the world through us.

That's why we ask the Holy Spirit in the Great Thanksgiving to make our gifts of bread and cup "be for us the

body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood."

If that is what "Growtivation" means in the context of Christian worship, Christians should be all for it!

What makes for a powerful act of Sending? Keeping the video and the observations above in mind, here's a short list.

- a. **Yes, Lord, Yes, first and foremost.** The "Closing Song" may be working title of the last act of "Contemporant" worship, but it's actually "strings that will make you cry" that may be the most important for the sending it accomplishes. Typically the words of such a song sum up some new or old way of living that people are promising to take on or carry with them as they go as a result of what they've just experienced in worship. Singing those words is already saying "Yes, Lord, Yes -- I will live this way now! Thank you!" Singing them "with strings that will make you cry" heightens the emotional investment and moves the assent beyond the merely textual and cognitive into the fully affective and embodied.

How does the Sending where you are help people affirm with minds *and* hearts that they will live what they have encountered as they leave?

- b. **Worshippers leave physically and emotionally energized.** "Strings that will make you cry" may sound like emotional drain, but when they make you cry "Yes!" the result is powerfully energizing. It is just such energy from the fullness of the encounter with God that has the potential to enable us to act differently and better than we could before we came.

Such energy can come in a variety of forms, though. It can be active and ecstatic, as "Sunday's Coming" illustrates, or it could be still and contemplative, such as the silence one might experience at a monastery or at the end of the service on Good Friday. Both can be physically and emotionally very energetic, though in Western cultures we may have relatively little experience with contemplative energy.

How does the Sending where you are ensure that people leave energized for acting on commitment to God they have come to make or remake during worship?

- c. **Worshippers are more likely than not to act on their encounters with God in worship after they leave and throughout the coming week.** If "Growtivation" were anything other than a catchy slogan to get folks in the door or to get congregations to try out "Contemporant" as "the next big thing," the proof would be in what actually happens in and through people's lives because they have participated in worship. We actually don't see how people leave the worship space and what they do next in "Sunday's Coming." We're just told they are challenged to grow and that, apparently, they do grow, though we're not told how. The implication seems to be the Closing Song happens, and bam... they're charged up and in the world, growing.

In reality, what makes us more likely to act on something we've experienced is some sort of venue that lets us get support for doing it outside ourselves and our own emotional processes. Simply sending everyone off more or less to fend for themselves after worship is unlikely to help or encourage people to make such helpful connections. The effect is sort of like sending people as far as their cars, but not much further. The physical and emotional energy felt during the Sending can wane fairly rapidly, and with them the commitment to act.

An inviting and well-stocked "coffee hour" after worship or some other intentional gathering opportunity could be a venue for folks to connect with an accountability group or a group of friends to share what they've discerned and decided to do and maybe to get some advice or feedback about some next steps for doing it.

How does the Sending in worship and what follows it where you are make it more likely that the

^ encounters and commitments they've made in worship will go with them "beyond their cars" and fully into the week ahead.

CONCLUSION:

If nothing else, "Sunday's Coming" may provide a fun opportunity to gather a group to watch together and see how they respond. Consider gathering your worship planning team for an afternoon or evening, provide good food and beverage, view the video, consider the ritual analysis from [Part I](#), and then use the discussion questions in this article to start talking about ways you can help your worshiping community experience true "Growtivation," the Growtivation that comes as we live "one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. "

