



The Roar of the Crowd

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Professional sports are back!! Sorta. The players, coaches, officials, and grounds crew are back. The cameras and production crew are back.

Fans, however, are noticeably absent from the giant arenas we built to feed our passion for watching sports. It's not safe right now to gather thousands of people in close-knit quarters for several hours. So the stadiums sit empty while the players do their best to entertain us virtually.

Even so, I can remember what it's like to be there. My family loves hockey. We all played hockey and had season tickets. I've posed by the Stanley Cup. While grocery shopping one day, I turned down an aisle and saw a professional player signing autographs. I immediately abandoned my full shopping cart, ran to the car, and brought in my hockey stick ('cause that's where I kept it, of course) for him to autograph. It was my lucky stick thereafter, until I broke it in a game. Though I'm relegated now to watching hockey on tv, I still remember the chill in the arena, the bright colors of team uniforms as fans shuffled along the tightly packed concourse (including those uniforms worn daringly by fans of the wrong team), the junk food we'd balance in our laps, and the roar of the crowd when the buzzer sounded a GOOOAAALLL! Most of this lives now in my memory...except for the crowd noise. Cheers, boos, groans: I can hear them just like I'm there. That's because it's all prerecorded and played at the right moments by the tech folks. Canned crowd noise is getting mixed reactions. What do you think?

The MLB developed an app to allow fans at home to punch in their desired reaction, and the arena techs will respond by increasing the sound level of the appropriate boo or cheer. Some NHL games show livestreamed fans on the big screen, cheering from home. Others have toyed with posing photographs of fans to fill the stands.

These adaptations suggest that the fans are important. The spectacle isn't the same without the active participation of those who come to encourage their teams. Savvy players sometimes talk about the importance of the fans during television interviews – I figured they were trying to sell more tickets and merchandise. Maybe not.

Is there a lesson for the church here in these days of virtual worship? Church leaders have long lamented the growing view that worship is a performance that should be designed to please the attendees – instead of designed to honor and praise God. The notion that we can sit back, watch, and critique worship – whether in the sanctuary, the parking lot, or on the computer – shifts our focus from God to ourselves. You might not like a particular hymn, but does God? As worshippers, we are invited to be active participants even when we don't hold the microphone.

I'm not suggesting we pipe in chatter, applause, or the occasional Amen! to our recorded worship services. I am suggesting that we need to be creative about how we build a new way of worshipping that lets us be active, not passive, worshippers. How do we move away from individual worship when it's convenient, fast-forwarding through the parts we don't like ... to worship that is a collective lifting of our thanksgiving to God? Returning to our buildings doesn't fix this problem; it existed before the pandemic. Judging worship on whether it's good entertainment has been around for years. The pandemic has just sharpened it.

Let me know what you come up with. Design an app, maybe. If our worship is Spirit-led, we'll refocus our intentions on celebrating God's presence together. Then the roar of the church will echo across the land, not just our living rooms.