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October 19, 2025

Colossians 3:12-17 & Ezra 3:8-13

We Belong to God: Worship that Glorifies God

We are continuing our Stewardship series **We Belong to God** exploring the role of worship this morning. As our PCO Mission states “As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God. The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ through worship that glorifies God.” To frame our exploration of “worship that glorifies God” we will hear from the Old Testament book of Ezra.

The books of Ezra (and Nehemiah) share the history of the Hebrew people after they return from exile in Babylon. They speak to the importance and challenges of rebuilding the infrastructure that was destroyed – the Temple, the protective walls, new homes and plots to grow food. They also speak to the challenges of rebuilding a culture – religious and social – to support the returning exiles and reestablish a right relationship with God. Our passage this morning shares a bit of that reconnection as the foundation for the new Temple was laid and the people sing praises to glorify God. Hear now these words Ezra 3:8-13

In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and up to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord. And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah, along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord had been laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away. **The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.**

“The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ through worship that glorifies God.” The phrase “to glorify God” or “that glorifies God” is a commonly used phrase by “church people.” I confess I use it a good bit, as it is a convenient shorthand for a broad swatch of our practices. At its most basic level, “to glorify God” is to acknowledge and honor God through praise and thanksgiving. Our Call to Worship and opening hymn are one of the ways we see this most explicitly in our worship service. “O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!”

Throughout scripture, especially in the Psalms, we are provided with instructions on how we glorify God. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann used a schema of orientation, disorientation, and new or re-orientation to describe the diversity of the Psalms.¹ I think this schema is also a helpful look for the trajectory of the Hebrew people. If we take a 30,000 foot view, we see the books of the Torah and early history – let’s say Genesis through Samuel, as books of “orientation.” This is grand ark from creation to anointing of David as the King of Israel has an upward swing, as the people were understanding who they were and to whom they belonged. There certainly mini-cycles of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation as they experienced family disputes, floods, migrations, slavery and freedom, covenants and conquest. However, the general thrust of this section of scripture is toward forming a community of people who worshipped the one true God, culminating in the building of a Temple to the Lord God by Solomon, which we hear in the beginning of the book of 1 Kings.

Through the remainder of the book of Kings and through the books of the major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and the eighth century prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah, a world of disorientation emerges. The Lord God calls out the people for the injustices they are perpetrating which stem from the people’s failures to live out the covenantal law established at Mt. Sinai, beginning with the command to have “no other God before the Lord God” and the commandments establishing how we are love God and love our neighbor. The season of disorientation ended with the exile of the Hebrew people to Babylon and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, including the grand Temple built by Solomon.

For the Hebrew people, the return from exile was a season of reorientation as they rebuilt from the destruction, as their homes, their lands, and their Temple were gone. They had a choice – they could be nostalgic for what once was or they could sing a new song and rebuild. They chose to rebuild – and rebuild not just structures but community. The book of Ezra opens with the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem and the beginning of reconstruction of the Temple. Ezra ends with the people spending time in confession, prayer and repentance and establishing reforms and guidelines for their new life together. A parallel

¹ Walter Brueggemann. *The Message of the Psalms*. Augsburg Old Testament Series. Augsburg Publishing House. 1984, p147-148.

and sometimes overlapping story is told in the book of Nehemiah, where those returning from exile rebuild the city that has been destroyed, the homes, the businesses and the protective wall around Jerusalem. While this reorientation history following exile is most closely associated with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is also a major thrust of the books of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. And as importantly as infrastructure was, there was a need to rebuild community, through the reestablishment of rituals and worship as we hear in the end of our passage from Ezra:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

This is worship that glorifies God. And while praise and thanksgiving are an important part of the process of giving glory to God, there is more to the picture. Worship that glorifies the Lord also includes our individual and communal acts that acknowledge God's place in our lives; our thoughts, our prayers, and our actions that put God above all others in shaping our values, ethics, and priorities.

In the letter to the Colossians, the author paints a picture where the mystery and majesty of Christ are central. While the Gospels often focus on the humanity of Jesus, the letters of Paul, particularly Ephesians and Colossians are more concerned with establishing Christ's teachings as superior to those of "false teachers." The false teachers were diminishing the "glory" of Christ, diminishing the "true divinity" of Christ, as they blended together Greek philosophy, Jewish law and Christ's teachings into a path to spiritual enlightenment. Paul calls this out and advocates for the people to return the emphasis of teaching on Christ as the head of the church, in which all of the fullness of God dwells and through which all reconciliation happens.² Within this context, the people of the church in Colossae are given instruction on how they should live as a people whose identity rests in the glory and majesty of Christ; how they should wear the mantle of Christ – or "clothe themselves" in Christ as we hear in the passage Ron read. "Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony..." The passage ends with instructions on worship: "with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Worship that glorifies God has a heart of gratitude for all who God is. And while our concrete understanding of Jesus the man may often be our representation of this, worship that glorifies God also embraces that majesty and the mystery of our creator. This understanding of

² Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Doubleday, 1996. p599-600.

worship comes from the Biblical understanding of “glory” as the magnificence and splendor of God. Notably throughout Exodus and Numbers as the Hebrew people were in transit from Egypt to Canaan, we hear of the “glory of the Lord” visiting and guiding the people. This glory appeared in the clouds and on the top of mountains. In Exodus 24:16-17 we hear it described: “The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord, was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.”

The “glory of Lord” signified God’s presence. Moreover it signified the splendor and magnificence of God's presence and character. In Hebrew the word for “glory” is *kavod* which is often described as having “weight” or “heaviness.” We might say today substance or *gravitas*. Our words of preparation from the author Frederick Buechner share a bit of that sense. It is often in art and music that the sense of mystery and magnificence that equate to glory are best represented.

A common depiction of “glory” is with a glowing crown. This “crown of glory” is worn by one who is to be revered and honored for their righteousness and faithfulness to the Lord. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to get a better appreciation of how important the “crown of glory” can be as an act of worship and devotion. One of the highlights of mine and Brian’s recent trip to Italy was a visit to the area where my maternal grandmother was born, in the mountains of northern Italy, in the Piemonte region near Milan and Turin. In addition to the opportunity to visit with family we had not seen in many years, and eat delicious meals, we visited the Santuario di Oropa.

The Sanctuary has been a pilgrimage spot for centuries, and this year was an important pilgrimage year, as it a year of the Jubilee for the Roman Catholic Church. The highlight of the Sanctury is a statue of the Black Madonna. The legend is that this statue was carved by the Gospel writer Luke and was found in Jerusalem by the church historian Eusebius who brought it Italy in the 4th century. Legend has it that the statue protected the people in the area from catching the plague in the 1300’s. The Black Madonna is usually housed in Old Basilica, a beautiful, but relatively small chapel. During this summer of Jubilee, the Black Madonna statue was moved to the Basilica Superior, the new chapel.³ And we happened to be there on the Sunday when the statue was returned to its home in the old chapel. The procession of the Black Madonna began with mass, followed by priests from all over the region wearing beautiful and intricate vestments leading a procession down a long courtyard and lawn from the new basilica to the old.

One of the remarkable elements of the ceremony was the crown. Above the statue was intricate filigree crown. Every 100 years, the statue is coronated with a new crown.⁴ We saw a

³ <https://www.santuariodioropa.it/en/the-sanctuary/>; <https://www.santuariodioropa.it/en/upper-basilica/>;

⁴ <https://www.santuariodioropa.it/corone-per-madonna-e-bambino/>

reenactment of the coronation as the statue was moved. But even more moving to me was “mantle of mercy” that accompanied the crown. This mantle was a prayer cloth 75 feet long, made of 15,000 fabric squares. As the creator of the project Alessandra Alberto explains, these prayer squares represent a fragment of someone’s life entrusted to Our Lady of Oropa, “memories of moments of joy and sorrow, accompanying it with a prayer intention.” This prayer cloak descends from the crown and represents the entire community and is “a symbol of protection that unites all people.” The small pieces of fabric, of various compositions and origins, such as wedding dresses, sheets, overalls, tablecloths were sewn in the silence of prayer by the nuns of the Monastery of Orta San Giulio and a group of volunteers from the neighboring town of Biella.⁵

The nuns wrote a letter about the process of creating this “mantle of mercy.” The letter begins with their acknowledgement that they took on the project before really understanding the scope of what was being asked of them: “When young Mary heard the announcement of the Archangel Gabriel, she did not yet know everything that would happen to her... but she simply said YES. We nuns of the island of San Giulio, when we received the proposal to make a cloak for the Madonna of Oropa, for the fifth centenary of the Coronation, using the textile fragments donated by the people, we too simply said YES. ... “ The nuns describe in detail the process of piecing together the small prayer squares, sewing everything by hand onto a base fabric. They also acknowledge the gravity of holding the prayers of so many people in their fingers: But we were only aware of a small part of the true magnitude of the work that we call “titanic.” The veil fell from our eyes when the first bags containing people's textile fragments arrived. We do not deny that every fragment of fabric that passes through our fingers has a voice for us, a silent and vibrant message.” The nuns end the letter with this beautiful sentiment: “With these simple words, we hope we’ve shared with you our adventure, born from a simple yes and carried forward by so many daily yeses, to let you know that we too are here to carry on the struggle of life, of believing, of hoping, and of loving. In communion. The nuns of the island of San Giulio.”⁶

And this is what it means to belong to God in worship that glorifies God. Every time we come to worship together, we carry on the struggle of life, of believing, of hoping, and of loving. We recognize that the mantle of mercy that flows from the crown is as much – or maybe even more – a marker of belonging to God in life and in death and in life after death. To the Hebrew people, the “glory of Lord” signified God’s presence. Worship that glorifies God means that we celebrate God’s presence with us. We recognize the majesty and the mystery of God. As people created in God’s image, we reflect God’s nature back to the world in our love and care for others. We live a life of commitment, recognizing the responsibility that comes with belonging to God. We respond in gratitude, giving of ourselves in every way, sharing our time, talent, our financial resources. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁵ <https://www.santuariodioropa.it/manto-misericordia-incoronazione/>

⁶ <https://www.santuariodioropa.it/lavventura-di-un-manto-per-la-madonna-di-oropa/>