

Southport Presbyterian Church
June Barrow
January 4, 2009

The Glory of God (and Four Williams)
John 1:10-14

The weekend before Christmas, there was a wedding right here. The night of the rehearsal, the bride and groom gathered with two pastors, musicians, and family members. Just before we finished, I saw my husband, who was coming to pick me up, slip into the Worship Center and find a seat way over in the corner, in the shadows. He sat next to one of our custodians, a man Al has known for years. The next morning, he told me about their conversation. He said that when he sat down next to this man, he said “What’s going on?” The custodian said, “Well, I’ve been sitting here praying to the Lord for this bride and groom and for them getting married. I’ve been asking the Lord to help them.”

Now, here is our first scripture for today, from John 1.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:10-14)

“We have seen his glory” John writes. And they had. But so many didn’t see it. How is that possible? Consider the second story. It’s from John 6 and takes place just after a miracle – the feeding of the 5000. After that amazing event, the crowd pursued Jesus, but he slipped away from them. When they caught up with him later on, here’s the next part of the story.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. [Let’s pause right here. Jesus has just performed a miracle that amazed the people so much that they followed him, looking for more of what he seemed to be offering. And yet Jesus cautions them immediately, seeing that they are looking for a change in their circumstances, something that made their lives immediately easier. Listen to what he says.]

Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

So they asked him, “What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is

written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” [Let’s pause here again. The story of God providing manna in the desert for their ancestors was a foundational story for them historically, culturally, religiously. Jesus is going to give this old story a new meaning. Listen.]

Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“Sir,” they said, “from now on give us this bread.”

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6: 25-35)

So let’s think about that – the glory of God, the glory that some were able to recognize in Jesus, but that so many others didn’t see. What does that mean? What does it look like? Does it show up today? We are made in the image of God. We are to do everything to the glory of God. What does this mean and how does it look in a human life? If so many did not recognize glory in Jesus, will we recognize it?

Let’s talk about four Williams and let them help us think about this.

The first William is William Wilberforce. In the last few years, new books and the film *Amazing Grace* have reminded us of his remarkable story. He lived during a time when slavery was still legal and when slave trading was a profitable business for English sea merchants. But prayers were rising – the prayers of the slaves, the prayers of people of conscience who longed to see this practice condemned and ended, who affirmed the dignity of all God’s people. William Wilberforce was elected to Parliament in 1780 and became an ardent follower of Jesus in 1785. One of the great influences in his life was John Newton, the converted commander of a slave ship, who wrote the hymn we love called “Amazing Grace.” At that time, in polite British society, to be an ardent follower of Christ was a “social transgression” and made one the object of scorn. But Wilberforce has been truly converted and he sought to live out his faith in every area of his life, including his work as a Member of Parliament. He became the spokesman for those who wanted slavery abolished. He tried and failed, tried and found limited success, and tried some more. It was 53 years after he entered Parliament and some years after poor health had forced him to retire that the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, abolishing slavery in the British Empire, was passed. William Wilberforce died three days later. For more than forty years, he was the voice of this cause, and as we look back now, we can see that God worked through William Wilberforce to show his glory. Prayers went up – thousands and thousands cried out – and God worked through many people, including this man, who was an orator, a politician, and a man of high rank. God worked through him, through legislation and political power, to bring relief and help and healing, to answer the prayers of many people. Many people, including William Wilberforce, were glory-bearers in that time.

Some years later in America, another great concern was brewing. The costs of alcoholism were more and more apparent. Lives were ruined, marriages destroyed, families broken, children hurt, all because of alcohol abuse. Concern grew and prayers went up – from those who were themselves trapped, from their spouses and children, from the Church. Now, wouldn’t it seem that if at one time God had worked through a great orator and politician like Wilberforce, and

through a legislated solution as He had in England, wouldn't it seem that God would do the same again? And so there arose a movement to abolish alcohol altogether. Great orators, famous ministers, powerful politicians joined together, crying out for prohibition and finally in the early part of the 20th century, Prohibition passed and became an amendment to the Constitution. Alcohol was banned. It seemed just like the story of the abolition of slavery, didn't it? But it wasn't the same. Prohibition was terrible public policy, and gave way to organized crime and a criminal underworld in ways no one had foreseen. Finally in 1933, it was repealed. It was a worthy idea, but it was a failure. So what about that? What about all the prayers that had gone up for deliverance for those trapped by alcoholism, those hurt by its consequences? What about all the prayers of the Church? Was God not at work, not answering these prayers?

Quietly, in a way that no one saw at the time, the glory of God was appearing. There was a man named William – and he is William number two – and Bill W is how he's known. One day when he was desperate, he cried out to God because he was sick and tired of being a slave to alcohol. Here is his prayer as he later recorded it: "I'll do anything! Anything at all! If there be a God, let Him show Himself!" He experienced a great sense of light and peace and he was converted. He never drank again for the remainder of his life. He became part of a small group movement of evangelical Christians, called The Oxford Movement. Those folks were his introduction to and grounding in faith in Christ. Later, one day in Akron, Ohio, during a failed business trip, he was greatly tempted to drink and realized that in order to stay sober he needed to help another struggling person. He began calling churches until he found someone else trapped in alcoholism, someone who needed help. Bill told him about his experience with alcohol and with God. Thus began Alcoholics Anonymous and the Twelve Steps.

AA is an answer to the prayers of thousands of people. Lives have been saved, marriages have been healed, and children have been rescued because of AA, which meets often in churches, including ours. Isn't it interesting that God's glory didn't show up that time through a legislated solution? The spokesman wasn't an esteemed orator, a great politician, or anyone famous at all. Rather, the glory-bearer was a very humble, broken man. All his life, Bill W remained a complicated and flawed person, but then look at the people God chose in the Bible. So many of them were unlikely people to be glory-bearers, but God chose them anyway. The glory of God appears where God chooses and God answers prayers as He will. He is the Sovereign Lord and He is bringing about the future according to His own purposes.

It's as though from the point of view of heaven, it all looks different. What seems important or consequential to us may not seem so at all from the point of view of heaven. Which brings us to William number three – Billy Graham. I once heard Billy Graham trying to express this idea, the idea that what impresses us – celebrity and fame and stature – doesn't matter to God at all. Here's how he expressed it. He said he imagined getting to the gates of heaven and being asked who he was. "Billy Graham," he'd say. And there would be residents of heaven looking through books and lists, muttering, "Billy Graham... Billy Graham..." Until finally one would say, "Oh, you're Ruth's husband." What he meant was that from the point of view of heaven, from the point of view of God's sovereignty and of eternity, we don't know how things look. We don't know what matters, we don't know who is important, we don't know all the places that the glory of God has shone, is shining or will shine forth.

So we have three Williams so far – William Wilberforce, Bill W, the founder of AA, Billy Graham. But who is our fourth? Let's return to the wedding rehearsal just a few days before Christmas. There was a beautiful bride and a handsome groom, thanking God for bringing them together. The glory of God was there. There were parents and family members who had prayed for these two. The glory of God was there. Pastor Kevin had written a beautiful wedding service, designing it just for this couple. The glory of God was there. And over in the corner, sitting in the shadows, was a man who has cleaned our buildings for many years. He was mostly unnoticed, just waiting for us to leave so he could clean up and lock up. And as he waited, he prayed to the Lord for that couple. It was an offering no one else knew anything about. That man's name is Bill. And at that moment, he was a glory-bearer. I think about the perspective of heaven, I see all of us gathered in the room, and I imagine a spotlight shining over in that corner where Bill sat, praying.

Friends, the glory of God is here too. There are people this weekend who are changing diapers in the nursery, teaching Sunday school (and some of them have taught for many decades, generation after generation of children), there are people driving a bus to pick up those who don't drive anymore. There are people who have worked to get the communion meal ready. And did you know there are people who have prayed for you? There are people now interceding for us. Right here in this room, there is someone choosing to forgive. Someone praying for someone else. Someone deciding to bless and encourage. Someone deciding to offer their time to work with children or to visit the elderly. There are glory-bearers all around us and let's see them.

Our scripture today told us something sobering: that though the world was made through Jesus, the world did not recognize him. It told us that his own did not receive him. So many completely missed the glory of God though it was shining right there in Jesus. Oh, may that not be us! May we be those who can say with John: "We have seen his glory." May we also offer ourselves as glory-bearers. You are made in the image of God, called to do everything to the glory of God.

After he did that great miracle and fed thousands of people, Jesus was pursued. But he could see that there was something amiss in what they wanted from him. So he said:

"I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

Jesus implored them not to look just for easier circumstances, a change in the details of your life, but to seek the deep glory of God. He told them: **"It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven...I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."**

Ask, Jesus invites us, not just for what we need and want, not just for the circumstances of our lives, but ask for God's glory for our souls. As we share the communion meal together, may it be sacramental for us, may you receive more of the life and love of Jesus, more of the identity of Christ, deep within your own spirit. May you and I be transformed more and more, little by little, into the image and glory of God. We have seen his glory, and may we see it more and more.