



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Doxology in the Dark

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

Introduction

Doxology is a statement of high praise and honor. *Doxa* means glory. The Bible is full of doxologies. Paul, for instance, right in the middle of writing the deep philosophical theology of the book of Romans, suddenly bursts out:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

³⁴“Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵“Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay them?”

³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

As he describes what God has done for us, he is swept away into doxology.

One night, when I was a little girl, my father called me from my bed, took me outside in my pajamas, and together we sat on the front porch steps, in the dark, looking for Sputnik, the first satellite launched into space. We saw the tiny light moving through the dark night sky. As that memory comes into focus, I recapture something else. I remember the night sky of my childhood. In many places in the middle of the 20th century, there was still enough natural darkness to see the dome of stars and the Milky Way, the pale arc of the 400 billion stars that make up our galaxy, our home in space. Do you remember when you could see it? How long has it been?

It used to be that on every clear, moonless night, everywhere in the world, the Milky Way was visible. People studied the stars and wondered at the scope and marveled at the distance. The night sky spoke of infinity, of grandeur, of a scale beyond comprehension, of heaven, of God. Brushing up against infinity, we were reminded of our finitude, our brevity. It put us in our place. It swept us away.

King David knew this: Three thousand years ago, he wrote: "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1).

In 1849 a more ordinary person, a government worker, wrote these words:

At the dead hour of the night, when the world is hushed in sleep and all is still ... With emotions too deep for the organs of speech, the heart swells out with unutterable anthems ... though we cannot hear, we feel the "music of the spheres."

Those are the words of Matthew Maury, the man in charge of the U.S. Naval Observatory. He was swept away.

Throughout both the Old and the New Testament, we meet people who have been swept away—not by the glory of the night sky, but by the glory and grandeur of God. King David, near the end of his life, spoke these words: "Yours, O LORD is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours" (1 Chronicles 29:10-11).

He was swept away, as were many writers of scripture who wrote about God. But's here the trouble. I read the soaring words of doxology and I sing them in hymns, too often aware that they are the words of others, not my own. They are the high praise of others, not my own. Aware that I am experiencing secondhand someone else's heartfelt declaration. Aware that I am not swept away, not deeply impressed enough for such praise of God. I seem to see dimly what they saw gloriously. It's a poverty of soul, because something in each of us is created to offer such praise. We long to worship; we need to kneel. But doxology seems dimmed.

Doxology Dimmed

The Milky Way is a shimmering river of stars, always there above us. More than 80 percent of Americans can't see it at all. Think of that. Until the last century, throughout all of human history, in every part of the world, on every clear and moonless night, the full, dazzling dome of the starry night was simply there, visible to every single person who looked up.

A man tells a story of visiting a friend in rural North Dakota. On a cold, still, clear night, they took a walk, heading away from town. He writes:

I looked up and couldn't believe my eyes.

"What is that?" I asked. "Are clouds coming in?"

"What do you mean?" the friend responded. "There are no clouds."

"Well then, what is all that?" I asked, arching my arm upward.

"Those are the stars. That's the Milky Way."

He could not recognize what he had not seen for so long. The reason we can't see the night sky, of course, is progress—the progress of artificial lights. Astronomers call it light pollution. Lights at night are a good thing—of course they are—but they have diminished something for us. We are left with a particular poverty of grandeur. We are losing our ability to know our place in the universe.

What has dimmed our doxology? Perhaps the cultural pollution of scorn and contempt in the daily rhetoric of public discourse as our culture coarsens. It lowers our gaze and erodes faith and hope and trust. Or perhaps our doxology is distracted by all of the choices and options and comforts and entertainments, spread out before us like a buffet of shiny objects.

It matters for us. Inside each of us is the God-given capacity to love and esteem and exalt and worship. We have a deep desire to be stirred and impressed by that which is greater than ourselves. We know there is something dignified, eternal and majestic about humanity. And we know as well that we are not ultimate. We know there is something greater.

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens...

When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have ordained,
what is man that you are mindful of him...

So wrote the poet David in Psalm 8:1-2, 3-4.

In the 1980's, a TV show called *St. Elsewhere*, set in an urban hospital, featured a brilliant, perfectionistic physician. He terrified the staff and he knew his own importance. To celebrate an anniversary, he and his wife went to Hawaii. On his return, he was asked, "Did you go to the beach? Did you swim in the ocean? Did you love it?" He replied, "Yes, I went to the beach; yes, I swam in the ocean; and no, I didn't love it. All that water made me feel insignificant."

But most of us want that. We want to stand before things of such size or power or beauty or significance that we know our own finiteness and limitations. We want to be overwhelmed. We want greatness and grandeur and glory. It's why we go to the Alps or the Rockies or the Great Wall or the Louvre. It's why we have national parks. It's why we love Hubble photos and the *Hallelujah!* chorus. We want to be swept away.

We want it and we need it. We need the greatness and glory of God. We need the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ. We need the unchanging wisdom of God revealed to us through the unchanging word of God. We need the unchanging fact that God is God and we are not. We need the unchanging reality that glory and nobility and holiness and true righteousness and ultimate justice do exist and will prevail and that we can aspire to these very great things.

When we see the Lord exalted, when we glimpse the glory of God in His greatness and power and majesty and position, we worship with

awe and deep respect and profound appreciation for all He has done for us. When I read the doxologies of the Bible written by David and Isaiah and Paul and Miriam and Elizabeth and Mary and Jude, I want that profound appreciation and praise and regard and awe to be my own.

The witnesses to the greatness and glory of God are found not only in the pages of history. I want to tell you a story. This story is occurring right now; it is unfolding this very day, halfway around the world.

Doxology Declared

On February 1 of this year, a mandate came down from the Central Government in China, requiring that all religious groups, no matter their size, register with the government and place themselves under the authority of a governmental bureau. In China, the majority of Christians meet in unregistered places, where they are free to teach the Bible and worship. This has been declared unacceptable and illegal. Government demands of religious groups have included removing crosses, singing songs that praise the Communist Party and its policies, hanging photos of President Xi, and refraining from teaching some parts of the Bible. Cameras with facial recognition technology have been installed in some places where believers gather. It is illegal for children to go to church with their Christian parents. Many Christian groups have found their leases revoked and some have had their doors padlocked. Hundreds have been arrested and some pastors are in prison.

Here is an update. Just four weeks ago, on August 30, a group of Christian leaders from 21 provinces across China issued a joint statement to the central government of China. These are their words and you will hear in them, as I do, doxology declared:

A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith

We are a group of Chinese Christians, chosen by the Most High God to be His humble servants...

We believe and are obligated to teach the world that the one true and living Triune God is the Creator of the universe, of the world, and of all people. All men should worship God...

We believe and are obligated to teach the world that all men, from national leaders to beggars and prisoners, have sinned. They will die once and then be judged in righteousness. Apart from the grace and redemption of God, all men would eternally perish.

We believe and are obligated to teach the world that the crucified and risen Jesus is the only Head of the global church, the sole Savior of all mankind, and the everlasting Ruler and supreme Judge of the universe. To all who repent and believe in Him, God will give eternal life and an eternal Kingdom.

Christian churches across China have suffered varying degrees of persecution, contempt, and misunderstanding from government departments during public worship and religious practices, including various administrative measures that attempt to alter and distort the Christian faith. ...

We are obligated to announce bad news to the authorities and to all of society: God hates all attempts to suppress human souls and all acts of persecution against the Christian church, and he will condemn and judge them with righteous judgment.

But we are even more obligated to proclaim good news to the authorities and to all of society: Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, the Savior and King of mankind, in order to save us sinners was killed, was buried, and rose from the dead by the power of God, destroying the power of sin and death. In His love and compassion God has prepared forgiveness and salvation for all who are willing to believe in Jesus, including Chinese people. At any time, anyone can repent from any sin, turn to Christ, fear God, obtain eternal life, and bring great blessing from God upon his family and country.

For the sake of faith and conscience, for the spiritual benefits of the authorities in China and of society as a whole, and ultimately for the glory, holiness, and righteousness of God, we make the following declaration to the Chinese government and to all of society:

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- **Christian churches in China believe unconditionally that the Bible is the Word and Revelation of God. ...** we are obligated to obey God rather than men, and we are obligated to teach all members of the church to do the same.
- **Christian churches in China are eager and determined to walk the path of the cross of Christ and are more than willing to imitate the older generation of saints who suffered and were martyred for their faith.** We are willing and obligated to face all government persecution, misunderstanding, and violence with peace, patience, and compassion.
- We declare that churches are willing to accept lawful oversight by civil administration. But under no circumstances will we lead our churches to join a religious organization controlled by the government. ...

The final sentence of this declaration reads: **“For the sake of the gospel, we are prepared to bear all losses—even the loss of our freedom and our lives.”**

On August 30 this was signed by 29 pastors. Six days later, by September 5, the number of signatories was 344 and still it grows.

What dims doxology? Not darkness. Not the darkening of circumstances. Darkness invites doxology to shine. In dark times and dark places, when doxology is declared, it gives courage to God’s people and challenges unbelievers and invites them to believe.

My husband Al and I are at a one year anniversary ourselves. A year ago we learned he had a mass, that it was cancer and that it was advanced. I have watched him do doxology in the dark, affirming the power and goodness and kindness and character of God this last year.

Deep within us, deeper than all of the distractions and diminishments we experience, we long to worship, we need to kneel, because we are made for glory. Nothing ennobles you and me more than to be deeply impressed, to be in awe. It is a great poverty to be near what is great and good and glorious and beautiful and not know, never see.

Doxology: Our Destiny

When the apostle John was an old man, sentenced to life in exile, his friends all dead, God showed him something. God revealed to him that doxology is our destiny—yours and mine. It's how the story ends; it's history's final chapter. This is what John saw; it's Revelation chapter 5.

5 Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ³But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... ⁹And they sang a new song, saying:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and
people and nation.

¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests
to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

That is a resounding doxology, but there is more.

¹¹Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times

ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹²In a loud voice they were saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

That’s a second doxology, but there is more.

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”

¹⁴The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

You are created for this. Doxology is your destiny. You and I will be part of that great crowd of worshippers. You will offer your love and praise and worship to the great and glorious God.

Last year I heard a mom tell of adopting a little boy, not an infant, but an older child. Night after night she put him to bed with these words: “Good night. I love you.” And the child responded each night with “Good night” or “Thank you” or “I know.” He was not quite able to say the words she longed to hear. She waited with patience and a bit of pain in her heart. Then one evening at bedtime the words came: “I love you too.” Hearing those words changed the mother. But do you know who it changed even more? The boy. Because we all have love to give. In a harsh and hurtful world, we button it up tight. But you are meant to offer love and praise and worship.

A few months ago, a lovely woman stopped me in the narthex, put her hand on my arm, and said, “The most important thing that happened to me in the last year is this: every morning I wake up and say, “Good morning, Lord, I love you!” ■