"SEE the Glory!"

Sermon, South Congregational Church, Centerville MA 13 Mar 05

1 Has anybody ever asked you why you believe in God? If so, what did you say? I say, Why *not*? Overwhelmed with internal and external evidences of God, why should I not be so surprised at unbelief as to ask unbelievers to come up with evidences for their unbelief? Historians who say that the early Christians outthought their competitors are referring to the fact that they prepared themselves with a greater weight of evidence for faith in "the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father" (as our UCC Statement of Faith puts it) than their opponents came up with against this God or for any of his rivals. In obeying the commandment to worship God with their *minds*, they minded the instruction put this way in I Peter 3.15 NRSV: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and [footnote] respect."

A closely related question, & more often encountered than *Why do you believe in God?* is the question *Why should I go to church?* That one, I recently answered thus: "It's a matter of courtesy. When you were a gurgling, slobbering infant, you'd not yet learned to say thank you for all the attention you were getting, for your life-support system, the people who loved & cared for you. Gradually, your appeciation for them grew, commensurate with your ability to say thank you. Then, as your brain developed enough to serve the abstractive power of your mind, you became able to be thankful for life itself. Now, to serve the purpose of public thanks for life, societies designate specific gathering places, sacred spaces. Buildings on those sacred spaces are the only structures erected specifically for people to come together to give thanks for life & all its supports & hopes. You are a social creature; & if you neglect to come together with other social creatures to give thanks to God, you are discourteous to God, you are an ingrate. But when you do come to church & thank & praise God in public, you complete the gratitude journey out of the cradle." Coming to church for the first time, or after a long absence, such a person would find us singing (as we just have) our thanks & praise to God "For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies, Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise." (#40 in WORSHIP & REJOICE)

2 Of course courtesy to God is not the only reason for regular church-going. Once a week we need to clean house, to get rid of last week's junk, to confess our sins in the presence of God & of his people, & through the grace of Word & sacrament receive & give thanks for his forgiveness. Further, as a community of Christian faith we come together each First Day of the week to pray for one another, & for those whose special needs we hear of, & for the spread of the saving-healing-hope-giving Story of Jesus & those who bear witness to it at risk of high cost, & for our church & all churches, for our nation & all nations, &--whenever together or alone we pray the Lord's Prayer--for the full-coming of God's kingdom. Again, we come to church to learn & relearn, especially to relearn by remembering: we are all so ignorant, & our more serious ignorance is not of what we never learned but of what we have forgotten. On the internet yesterday, a pastor asked me to explain the Gk. word "anamnesis." In Christian liturgy, the anamesis is the prayer which calls back to mind the passion (suffering & death), resurrection, & ascension of our Lord Jesus: "anamnesis" is just that: it's "calling back to mind again," recalling, remembering for a specific purpose. We come to church to cure our ignorance from forgetting, under the barrage of the past week's scurrings & worryings, what is most important in life, where the center is, what price God has paid to return us to his glory from the wanderings of our minds & the waywardnesses of our lives. And we come to church to rejoice! It says so right on the cover of our hymnal. Across these 65 years I can still hear a fellowstudent singing "Oh dry those tears, through all the years life was not made for sadness; 'twill come, alas, but soon will pass: life was not made for sadness." No, life was made for joy, joy in the presence & through the power of God, joy as we "take our burden to the Lord and leave it there" on the altar of God. The joy the church has to offer, for the worship & the week, is the joy of seeing & hearing God's glory & delighting in his presence & purpose in here & out there. For as Gerard Manly Hopkins put it, inviting us (as this sermon's

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title puts it) to "see the glory"--"The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil Crushed. When do men then now not reck his rod? / Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. / And all for this, nature is never spent; There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; And though the last lights of the black West went--Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world Broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

3 A nine-year-old girl whom I knew through her mother, a student of mine, knew what that great poet was rejoicing in when she wrote a poem whose last line was "See the BEauty" (which I adapted for this sermon-title, "SEE the Glory!"). Not only did she take time to smell the flowers: through the flower's face she saw the face of God. In tears, her mother gave me the originals of a number of her daughter's God-centered poems. (Two samples: "God is my Father. / ...My Father is not my Daddy. / He is just borrowing me...." This one, of her parents: "I am whatGodgave to them to borrow.") A note before I read the poem: The Bible word "glory" is a many splendored thing. You may remember that a few months ago I preached on it as something we Christians are called on to give to God--as the Lord's Prayer puts it, in "hallowing his name," so honoring him in worship & work & all of life that we contribute to his good reputation. This sermon adds, to that GIVING glory to God, the practice of SEEing the glory that is already there in what God has made, the whole creation in great & small--& of course, when we see it & speak about it, as did this nine-year-old in her poem, we are adding to God's reputation: my two sermons join hands. So how are beauty & glory related? When we see the beauty with the eye of faith as well as with the eye of flesh, the beauty becomes transparent of the glory: through the face of the flower our little girl sees the face of God. You can be like her. Her wealthy father wasn't. To him she addresses the poem: "GO! / Rush Rush Rush! / Can you **stop**? / God can! / YOU CAN TRY IT! / Sit down, stay a while. / He doesn't mind. / He made **peace**. / He made the green grass, / He made the sky. / Come on, stop and look. / See the beauty!" But her father did not hear her poem. He spent all his free time on his yacht, away from his family. The artificial beauty of his yacht had blinded him to the beauty of his child, through whose face & soul he could have seen the beauty & glory of God. And delight! Delight in his child! Beauty, & delight in what is right, are doors to the glory of God.

4 In our first Bible reading this morning, the prophet (Eze.37.1-14) sees through dry human bones the glory of God's power to reverse death back into life. In the second reading, the psalmist (Ps.130), "longing for the Lord," sees the coming glory of the Lord in the "fullness of redemption," (as it's put in the Lord's Prayer) God's "will done on earth as it is in heaven." In our third reading (Ro.8.6-11), we look at Jesus & see in & through him the glory of "life and peace," for by his self-giving love we are "put right with God," freed from "the law of sin and death": because we could not "please God" by our own devices, God "sent his own Son" to announce & to be the Good News of forgiveness & fellowship, living "in union with Christ," who "lives in us." And in the last reading (Jn.1.11-45), Jesus delays two days after hearing of the death of Lazarus, & he doesn't call into the tomb "Lazarus, come out!" until everybody knows his friend has been dead for days & (vs.39) the corpse is stinking. So our first reading was about corpses so long dead that their bones are dry, yet God can restore them to life; & our last reading was about a stinking, four-day-old corpse whom Jesus resusitated, having said "I am the resurrection and the life." Last Sunday, the text was from two chapters earlier in the Gospel of John: the man was born blind so that God's glory might be seen in Jesus' giving him sight: this Sunday, Lazarus dies so that in Jesus' restoring of his life, (vs.4) the witnesses can see "God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." This Gospel is saying that defective births, tragic deaths, & everything between birth & death--all is meant to open our eyes of faith to the glory of God: everything that is & everything that happens is a hidden Easter egg for our finding & delighting in. Our Lord's resurrection happened once, but Easter is every day we see the glory & try to "do everything for the glory of God" (1Cor.10.31). Eternal life is now, for in our risen Lord we have "passed from death to life" (Jn.5.24; compare 11.26).