

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia  
Mission Build Celebration Sunday  
August 28, 2022

## *“What Glory!”*

*Isaiah 40:3-5, John 1:14*

**George C. Anderson**

Prayer for Illumination:

Holy God, whose face we cannot see and whose will often is a mystery, we ask that you reveal something of yourself to us. As with the bush that burned but was not consumed, let your glory shine through scripture and sermon so that our hearts and lives will be ignited with your love. Amen.

Isaiah 40:3-5

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.



Millie and I did something that commoners like us had not been able to do before 1993. While in London on sabbatical, we went on a tour of Buckingham Palace: *750 rooms* in this royal residence—great hall, dining hall, library, ballroom, music room: each carefully decorated and furnished to impress. Over 7000 paintings are available to line the halls and hallways. Come to my study, and 5 minutes is all I need to point out my family pictures. It would take hours (and you would get more than your 10,000 steps) for a member of the royal family to point out all the portraits of ancestors..., many of them painted by the masters.

Not that members of the royal family do that very often. The portraits are hung not for nostalgia, but to remind visitors *how impressive is this bloodline*. The columns, floor to ceiling windows with drapes, balconies, domed ceilings, exquisite antiques, and display of arms are not there simply to provide a residence. They are there to do what was done to Millie and me: leave visitors in jaw-dropped-awe in response to the glory of the palace and the family that lives there. I love stories of the English monarchy—I loved watching *The Crown*—and their great accomplishments and acts of charity are not lost on me. But, let's be honest, there were chapters of the monarchy when intimidation was also the point; that there lived in such a grand place someone with the power to give a command like, “**Off with their heads.**”

Having seen Buckingham Palace and the equally impressive palace in Versailles, I have checked them off my bucket list. What I have yet to see are the pyramids of Egypt... especially the famous ones in Giza. The largest of the three in Giza has a foundation that covers 13 acres with blocks weighing 15 tons each. The pyramids were built for various reasons, but one overriding reason was to *set the empire straight* on how things are to be. On the enormous foundation of the work of slave masses rose the ever-diminishing layers of Egyptian society, each layer resting on the support of those beneath them, until there is reached a point that is 450-feet-high. And the point is this: Pharaoh sits atop Egypt's world.

He is the one to whom all blessings flow,  
the god who is to be served by all below.

*What glory!*

Walter Brueggemann reminds us, though, that it is a glory that comes of enforced scarcity of the workforce needed to harvest the fields and build these impressive pyramids.<sup>1</sup>

Some of those slaves, the Hebrews, escape from beneath the pyramid that is Egypt. And you'd think that these liberated slaves would be glad to be free of the great burden laid upon them by all those layers of Egypt that lead to Pharaoh. But they remember the glory of the pyramids and a system that at least sheltered and fed them. They may have been at the bottom of the pyramid, but at least they knew their place ... *and* look how high could grow an empire that in a strange way *depended on them*. It's a cruelty of human psychology that abused masses can be duped into thinking they are value and worth because those who master them are powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Delivered into Covenant*, WKJ, 2021, p. 3.



So, now the Hebrews are free. Where is God's glory in the wilderness, the God who brought them out from under the hand of Pharaoh? They ask this question because they are afraid of starving or dying of thirst.

Well, God's glory is all around them, but they have to learn to see it. God's glory is seen in fire that warms,  
in the cloud of presence,  
and in the tent of meeting.

If, like me, you find those images from Exodus too symbolic, let's get more to God's point. God's glory is seen in manna that prevents starvation and water that prevents dehydration. It is seen in sustenance and hope, in the compassion of the God who compelled Pharaoh to set slaves free.

Be of a certain mind and heart,  
and you'll "ooh" and "ah" at pyramids and palaces,  
the creation of Empires.

I do.

Be of another mind and heart, and you'll "ooh" and "ah" at  
mountains, canyons, rivers, and stars,  
the creations of God.

I do.

They truly inspire awe, and my "Oohs and Ahs" have joined the chorus. But the *essential glory* of God is missed if you don't see this: Unlike Pharaoh, God is not satisfied with impressing us with creations like mountain ranges and a canopy of stars. Yes, they speak to the glory of God, but their majesty finds definition when we then look down  
and see manna on the ground  
and water coming from the rock.

To use Isaiah's vision of the wilderness, God's essential glory is seen in the pyramid being flipped on its head, when high places are brought low and low places of poverty and need are lifted up. It is in the justice and compassion of love where God's glory is most clearly seen.

Or to use the vision of the gospels, we see God's glory best when God's Word, high and lifted up, becomes flesh among us. We behold God's glory, the glory of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth, when we see Jesus

feed thousands in the wilderness yet again;  
help the sick heal,  
the crippled walk,  
the blind see,  
the dying live;  
when he embraces children who are for the moment shunned,



and when he teaches the masses and trains his followers to lead so they, on their own, can bear witness to God's compassion and grace.

Our worship service celebrates the successful completion of the *Mission Build Campaign*. On the surface, it might seem that our celebration is more of what can be built to impress.

- Across the street, a house will be renovated.
- Down the street, the Presbyterian Community Center facility will be replaced with something bigger.
- At Union Seminary, a dormitory will be renovated and it will be much nicer than when I lived in it.
- And in the Dominican Republic, a hospital, much bigger than the clinic it is replacing, will be completed.

But God's glory will not be seen in the buildings...

*unless* we see ministries of compassion and grace that take place within them,  
ministries that lift those who have been brought low.

The house to be renovated across the street will become *Alexa House*, named in memory of Alexa Cannon and her heart of compassion.

Every time a meal is served in that home,  
and its lights turned off for a safe night of rest...;  
or every time family members get to visit remotely their loved one in prison,  
God's glory will shine.

Within the new Presbyterian Community Center facility,  
every time a bag of food is shared,  
or assistance rendered to a family in financial crisis;  
every time children of working parents are tutored  
so, college becomes more than a dream but a probability;  
every time unemployed adults are trained with new and needed skills,  
God's glory will shine.

In the city of San Juan de la Maguana, within the hospital now being built,  
every time someone who lacks the resources to pay is given medical care-  
a disease treated,  
a surgery performed,  
a baby delivered,  
an emergency dealt with,  
God's glory will shine.



And within the William R. Klein Leadership Institute at Union Presbyterian Seminary,  
every time leaders of the church are taught in the way Jesus taught his followers,  
every time they are trained to lead the church to bear witness to God's love,  
God's glory will shine.

And when we as followers of Jesus, and when we as the church, continue to worship and  
serve God, bearing witness to the God from whom blessings flow down into our lives and world  
God's glory will shine.

Do you have minds and hearts today *to see God* in needs met and lives transformed! If so,

**“Ah, what glory!”**

Benediction:

To God be the glory  
and on earth, peace among all people with whom God is pleased to dwell.”

