

To God Be the Glory
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Isaiah 6:1-8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This summer, I want to take a trip with you, head out on a journey, seek a grand adventure, and learn new things. I hope you won’t mind that I’ve already chosen the road map: The Presbyterian Hymnal. There are so many wonderful hymns, familiar hymns that we could hum if given the first line, hymns which we continue to hum well into Sunday afternoon when we’ve sung them Sunday morning. We may love to sing them, or hear them sung, and be content but there are theological depths and premises,

too, that may not otherwise get addressed directly in the course of a Sunday morning. Our exploring won't be idle wandering around some pretty sites - these hymns are built on a solid foundation of faith and biblical substance. So, through September 2, you'll find the titles of the sermons will share the titles of hymns. Buckle up and let's begin!

To God Be the Glory, hymn number 485, was written in 1875 by Fanny Jane Crosby. The tune was composed by the very musically gifted William Howard Doane that same year. Frances, or Fanny, Crosby was born in 1820. She was blind, either from birth or after a mustard poultice slipped over her eyes during treatment for a cold at six weeks old. At one year old, her father died and she was then raised by her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother watched her while her mother worked and she read to her, teaching Fanny to memorize what she heard, since Braille had not yet been developed. By the time she was ten, Fanny Crosby had memorized the first four books of both the Old and New Testaments. She enrolled in the New York Institute for the Blind when she was fifteen and, after graduation, was extended an offer to teach at the school. While working there she met a fellow teacher, who was also blind, and they married and had a daughter who died as an infant.

Despite the hardships and sorrows she faced, Fanny Crosby not only retained the faith she had learned as a very young child but her faith grew with persistent nurturing. She and her husband gave away almost all their earnings, sometimes giving away so much that they ended up not being able to meet their rent or buy enough food for themselves. "They worked in the missions in the poor districts of New York, giving food, and witnessing for God." And, beginning at the age of forty, she wrote over 7,000 hymns.¹

"O come to the Father through Jesus the Son, and give Him the glory: great things he hath done!" Fanny Crosby did not dwell on her own challenges and sorrows but looked to God's greatness in her life and throughout all of history. We read a bit about that historical greatness in the reading in Isaiah: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him...and one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'" Indeed, great things has God done, here implied by God's greatness of size, so great that his robes are so big as to fill the temple where the hem touches the earth. And the appropriate response is the same as that of the prophet Isaiah, who volunteered himself as an ambassador with the words we sang just last week at confirmation: "Here am I; send me!" Fanny Crosby said it this way: "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear His voice! Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice! O come to the Father through Jesus the Son, and give Him the

¹ Life details for Fanny Jane Crosby and William Howard Doane come from http://www.gaffneyledger.com/news/2008-04-04/Columns/Stories_Behind_The_Hymns.html and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny_Crosby.

glory: great things He hath done!”

No greater thing can be recounted than what we read in John. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” We sing, “Great things He hath taught us, great things He hath done.” Nicodemus says through John: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Great things he hath taught us; great things he hath done.

Among the great things he has done, Christ “yielded His life an atonement for sin.” Remember those theological depths and premises I mentioned at the start? The theological understanding of atonement is more complex than our general understanding of being sorry for something. We atone for our missteps by saying sorry and, if possible, making up for them. We’d miss something greater if we applied this understanding to what Jesus did through his death on the cross. “There are different theological descriptions of the ways by which the death of Jesus Christ on the cross effects an ‘atonement’ or bringing together of God and humanity. The Christian church has never stated only one, definitive view or theory of how the death of Jesus Christ effects salvation.”²

Depending on which scholar you read, the categorization of atonement theories varies. I find what Shirley Guthrie has to say of great value; he offers four biblical images of atonement. First is a financial image where Christ’s life is ransom for many. Second is a military image of God and the devil in battle; God’s Son is killed but reemerges victorious. Third is a sacrificial image where Christ is the lamb being sacrificed as well as the priest making a sacrifice on behalf of the people. Fourth is a legal image: God serves as judge with Christ, also God, paying the price. Only Christ can do this because only Christ is completely innocent. I know that’s a lot to take in. Simplified, we can say Christ died on the cross to pay a ransom for our lives, to defeat the devil, to be the holiest sacrifice to God on our behalf, or to pay the damages determined when we are judged. Guthrie says wisely that the explanation of atonement cannot be summed up in just one of these theories; instead, we must view each one as a partial truth. We need to pull them all together to understand atonement.

What all theories of atonement, especially when you view them as parts of the whole as Guthrie suggests, point to is what Fanny Crosby continues with: “So loved He the world that He gave us His Son, who yielded His life an atonement for sin, and opened the lifegate that all may go in.” Christ died on the cross, and rose to new life, so we might all have new life; he opened the lifegate that all may go

² All information on atonement theory is pulled from quotes I compiled while preparing for the Theological Ordination Exam of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2006 and 2007. They come from sources by authors Donald McKim, Daniel Migliore, Shirley Guthrie, and William Placher with David Wills-Watkins.

in. Our lives have been ransomed so that death might not be the final answer, so that we live another day and have another chance to live abundantly. Our faith in Christ allows us to be included in Christ's offering of himself on our behalf to humbly show our desire for forgiveness for the past. As the sacrifice is accepted by God, we, in return, receive another chance. This same next chance to live abundantly comes when our debts are paid off by Christ to God - we start with a fresh ledger, another chance again. And it is God the Spirit, although not mentioned in our hymn or in this week's lessons, who inspires us, who moves us, who prompts us to use these second and third and one hundred and fifty-sixth chances to live abundantly and, in so doing, give glory to God.

Life abundant, both here and in the next life, are available for all, no matter who we are or what we have experienced in life, because of Christ's atonement on our behalf. Fanny Crosby said: "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank Him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me...When I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior." So might we, too, be blessed in such a way that we may give glory to God through our own trials and tribulations. "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!"

Let us pray: In all things, to God be the glory. Amen.