



Dr. James C. Howell
Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-22
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I love the moment in Israelite worship, you actually said it out loud yourself. The people are gathered together in worship. They hear exotic images about the wonder of the grandeur of the glory of God, and all of the people in the temple together say "Glory, glory." And the reason that they say glory is that they were special among the nations of the ancient Near East. The other nations had their divinities, but they thought of their gods as remote or as capricious, not as positively involved. The Israelites alone could have those wonderful words from Isaiah in which God says, *You are precious, you are beloved, I love you, I have redeemed you, I have made you for my glory.* You are precious in the eyes of God.

Claus Westermann, the great German scholar, put it this way:

A tiny miserable and insignificant band of uprooted and confused and sad men and women are assured that they, precisely they, are the people to whom God has turned in love. They, just as they are, are dear and precious in God's sight, and think who says this, the lord of all powers and authorities of the whole of history and all of creation.

The people cried "Glory" and they thought about all the good that God had done in creation. Have you noticed what God has done in creation? Are you too busy running from one place to another to be attentive to all that God has graced us with here? What about in your own life? I've told some of you before, I went on a clergy retreat one time and we had an entire afternoon devoted to a single question. You were to be alone in a room and you were to reflect on what God has done in your life. I thought, "Well that will take a few minutes. That can't fill too much time," but actually when you have a whole afternoon and not much else to think about, you remember very many things that God has done, ways that God has put people in your path who have graced you, who have loved you, things that have turned your way that have helped you, kindness, mercy, God's sustaining presence.

Isaiah's words *I have called you by name. You are precious. You are mine and I love you.* This was said in what was not a sissy period of history. It was one of the hardest times in all reported human history. Jesus also came during a very painful, difficult time of history, and he waded into the Jordan River to be baptized. Sometimes we trivialize baptism. We have a baptism and, like today, you looked and said, "Oh, the baby is so cute." When I was in Davidson, I was at a party one time, and a man – I didn't know him real well – he came up to me and said, "I'm going to have my assistant call your assistant." And I said "What will they talk about?" And he said "Well, we want to have the baby done." Done. What happens in baptism is that parents make extraordinary promises about what they're going to do, and the congregation makes extraordinary promises about the way they're going to stay committed and support this family and be the kind of church where people want to grow up and be Christian, but most importantly, we invoke the power of God. We believe that God's spirit comes down and that is

no small thing. That is the big thing. This child that was just baptized has been anointed by the very spirit of God.

I love the way Luke tells the story of the baptism of Jesus. He alone adds that the spirit descended in bodily form – in bodily form. You know, Paul said that *Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit*. You can't get out of this and think, "Well, that must be somebody else's body." No, your body, the body that you are occupying today. Paul says that that is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Could it be that the way the Holy Spirit descends today is through my body and your body, that we become the instruments of God's spirit here on earth? Paul also said that *We, together as the church are the Body of Christ*. Could it be that the way God's spirit descends in bodily form today is precisely through the fellowship of the church, the activity of what we do together, the scent of the spirit in bodily form? All the people in Israel when they gathered for worship, they cried "Glory."

You know, I was married here at Myers Park Church. Lisa and I came right down here and said our vows many years ago now, and at the time I didn't live in Charlotte. I was pastor of a little country church where all the people were farmers or day laborers. They generally wore overalls. They were country people, and they were intrigued by this thing, that I was marrying a Myers Park woman, down in such a highfalutin church. They were excited about this, partly, you want to get your minister married off, but also, that I was doing it here, and they got to thinking about that and they said, "We want to ride together to come to the wedding." And at this church, it was a small, poor church, they didn't own a van or a bus or anything, but there was a church just over the hill that did own a bus that they decided they wanted to use. Now this particular bus was bright blue and had bright yellow writing on it. In great big letters it said, "Glory bound." In addition to those yellow letters it had red letters from various Bible verses, some threatening you burning in hell and others promising great things for you if you follow Jesus. And they said, "We're going to get in that bus, all together, and we're going to come to Myers Park Church, and we're going to park right out in front there" – in the glory-bound bus. We laugh about that, glory-bound. I hope those people in the church across the hill got it right, that we're glory-bound, that I'm glory-bound, that you are glory-bound.

You see, Isaiah says, *I love you, you're precious in my eyes*, and then rather remarkably says, *I made you for my glory*. What that means is that you and I exist for the glory of God. God does not exist to glorify you. You and I exist to glorify God. And that may make you feel like "Who, me? How could I glorify God? Somebody else needs to do that. How could I be for the glory of God?" And we may want to mirror the glory of God in our lives, so how do we do this? We try to talk to you about things like "Growth in faith this year, come to worship, be in a Bible study and try to be holy, be diligent and be prayerful." And in all these ways, we perhaps better mirror the glory of God. I've been thinking this week, though, about other ways we may do that. For instance, some of you, I know, you've shared with me your story, I know your brokenness, but the fact is, my assumption is that all of us in this room have a brokenness inside. Some of you I know have told me your stories, and you have been forgiven much, but the fact is all of us in this room have been forgiven much. Could it be that the way we mirror God's glory is simply by being broken people who are still precious in God's eyes? Could it be the way we mirror the glory of God is that we who are so flawed and make so many mistakes that we simply are forgiven? And walking around as forgiven people, God is glorified? Could it be that the very

fact that we exist, that there's something that all of us in this room have in common right now, it's probably the only thing that we all have in common, but it is this: Every one of us in this room is breathing and has a pulse, every one of us. We exist. And I wonder if the very fact that we exist gives glory to God? You could not have existed on your own. You could not, however many years ago, have said "I shall exist, I shall be born, I will will myself into my own existence." None of us did this. We're all passive. It just happens to us, you just are born. God knits you together in your mother's womb, the same God who said that *You are precious*, the same God who said *I love you*, the same God who said *I have called you by name*. The very fact that you exist gives glory to God. And maybe if we could think about it that way, everything would change. Sometimes just a simple shift in our prospective can bring a whole new life-giving prospective to everything.

Last Monday night and Thursday morning, I taught a class on parenting, how to raise children to be Christians, and in it I quoted something that Mother Teresa said – think about this – Mother Teresa said:

Whatever you do in your family, whatever you do for your wife, whatever you do for your husband, whatever you do for your children, you do it for Jesus.

Think about if we thought about that all the time, whatever you do with your friends, whatever you do with your co-workers, whatever you do with your family, your parents, your children, your spouse, whatever you do, you do it for Jesus. If we thought about this, we would be gentler and maybe calmer and less anxious and more purposeful and more deliberate, that we would find more meaning in our existence. And we would begin to hear and to understand that in God's eyes, we and others truly are precious. We have been redeemed. We are loved. We were lost and confused and sad or happy and cheerful, whatever we are, that we are loved by the God who hurled this universe into being. Then we will begin to understand this descent of God's spirit in bodily form, and then we will begin to understand why the people of Israel when they gathered for worship all together cried "Glory, glory, glory." We exist for the glory of God, glory.

Amen . . .