

Declare His Glory

Psalm 96:1-13

Sunday, October 6, 2024

In early February, our Strategic Leadership Team thought through a challenging question: What are E-Free Bemidji's Core Values? What are the "constant, passionate, biblical core beliefs that go deep and really, truly empower and guide the ministry [of E-Free Bemidji]"?¹ Why do we do what we do as a church?

On one level, we could have turned to our church's Statement of Faith. These theological convictions state what we as a church believe about our triune God, his word, the problem of sin and the promise of the gospel, the church, how Christians are to live, and what is our future hope in Christ. Each of those ten statements begins with the words "We believe." Certainly, these convictions shape why we do what we do.

But our Strategic Leadership Team understood that theology alone doesn't tell us who we are as a church. Ideally, every EFCA church would unite around these convictions. But what makes E-Free Bemidji unique? What are the values that "speak to what is most important in [our] church's life"?²

On a cold Monday evening in February, our Strategic Leadership Team started throwing ideas at the wall. Literally. If you had walked into the Chapel that night, you would have seen dozens of Post-it notes on the wall, each with a word or phrase that described something we value as a church.

If I remember right, one of the notes I stuck to the wall said "Food." Let's be honest. This church likes to eat. From Newcomers Lunches to Potlucks and cookouts, to homemade goodies in the Connection Cafe, we do value eating together.

Once all our sticky notes were posted, we stood back and started to see some common themes emerge. Our Strategic Leadership Team eventually landed on the following six core values:

- God's Glory
- Biblical Foundation
- Congregational Worship
- Caring for the Body of Believers
- Connecting with the Community
- Evangelizing the Lost

I hope you've taken the time to read the Strategic Plan we made available last month. On pages 3-4, you will not only see those six values listed, but you will also see how each one is grounded in Scripture. These core values empower and guide our ministry.

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*, Third Edition, 2013, Baker Books, p. 150.

² Ibid. 146.

They stand behind our mission of *becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together*. These values inform our discipleship pathway: Gather, Grow, Give, and Go.

Next Sunday as we celebrate our church's 100th anniversary at our combined 9:30 am service, you will see how these same values not only describe E-Free Bemidji in 2024, but they have been true of us as a church family for a century. And Lord willing, should he give this church another 15, 50, or 150 years of ministry, we pray that these same values would empower and guide our ministry for years to come.

This morning, we're considering the first of these core values: God's glory. I would argue that God's glory is the paramount value and that the other five derive their importance from this one.

We value a biblical foundation because, as 2 Timothy 3:16 says,

“All Scripture is God-breathed.” (2 Tim. 3:16a, NIV).

Our glorious, transcendent, sovereign creator saw fit to reveal himself to us in the pages of Scripture. Every page adds to our knowledge of God and leads us to respond with the angels in heaven who sing,

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Rev. 4:11, NIV).

We value congregational worship because worship is what we were made for. To paraphrase the Westminster Shorter Catechism,

What is our chief end as men and women?

Our chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

We value caring for the body of believers, connecting with the community, and evangelizing the lost because the very first chapter in the bible teaches us that

“God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27, NIV).

God is glorified when we love our fellow image-bearers, not only our brothers and sisters in Christ but also our neighbors who don't yet know our Savior. God is glorified when we tell those who are lost that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and that while “the wages of sin is death, ...the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 3:23; 6:23, NIV).

There are many passages we could turn to in Scripture to help us appreciate the glory of God. The one I want us to turn to this morning is Psalm 96. As you're turning there, think about the last time you received an invitation in the mail.

Think about the last invitation you received to a graduation party, a wedding, a baby shower, or a birthday party. As we look together at Psalm 96, I want you to view this psalm as an invitation. In this psalm God's people are invited to consider his glory, declare God's glory, and give him the glory due his name.

Psalm 96 begins,

“Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary” (Psa. 96:1-6, NIV).

First, this psalm invites us as God's people to **consider his glory**.

Last month, the New York Times featured an interesting article on their website. As a test of focus, the authors invited readers to view a piece of art for 10 uninterrupted minutes. The image they chose was of a 16th-century tapestry known as *The Unicorn Rests in the Garden*. After clicking on the page, the image is shown and a timer starts. Every few seconds a prompt appears on the screen inviting the viewer to consider some aspect of the the image. I'll admit, I didn't come close to the whole 10 minutes.

As we read the first half of Psalm 96, we are invited to consider God's glory. Let me read those verses again.

“Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary” (Psa. 96:1-6, NIV).

The psalmist isn't heaping up adjectives for the sake of being poetic. He is trying to express in words the inexpressible beauty of the glory of God. Great is the LORD! His deeds are marvelous. When we consider all that God has done in creation, in redemption, and throughout salvation history, we marvel at his work.

God's power and strength are unmatched. The so-called gods of the nations are nothing but worthless idols. He alone is worthy of praise. The one who formed the

universe is worthy of honor and reverent worship. Words like *splendor* and *majesty* remind us that he alone is our Sovereign King.

How often do we stop and take in a passage like this and simply consider the glory of God? These verses paint a vivid picture of God's glory in all its beauty. If a tapestry from the Middle Ages is worth taking 10 minutes to observe, study, and ponder, how much more should we give our attention to Scripture and consider God's glory?

Consider too the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Consider what John meant when he said,

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV).

Consider these words from the Apostle Paul,

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:15-20, NIV).

God invites his people to consider his glory. And when we consider God's glory, we must not keep what we see to ourselves. Look again at the first three verses of this psalm.

“Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Psa. 96:1-3, NIV).

God's people are commanded to sing, sing, sing! Three times the word *sing* is used to describe an expression of praise. God's people are told to *declare* his glory all the time, everywhere, to all peoples. The word *declare* in v.3 means that God's people are to announce his glory to the nations. We could say that we are to preach the gospel of his glory—the good news to all people. In other words, Psalm 96 invites God's people to **declare his glory**.

We are to declare God's glory in song. "Sing to the LORD a new song!" it says in v. 1. How appropriate that today we are learning a new song that we will sing together to the glory of God. The song *Deeply Devoted* that Jason shared with us as we gave of our tithes and offerings earlier is a song composed for one reason: for God's glory. Yes, the occasion for writing this new song is our 100th Anniversary Celebration next weekend. But look again at the lyrics printed on the insert in your bulletin. The song isn't about our church. It's not a song about our ministry. There's no mention of our church's anniversary. This song isn't about us. It's not even for us. The song is about our glorious God. The song is for declaring his glory.

God's people are to declare his glory to one another in song. They are also to "declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Psa. 96:1, NIV). If I asked you what our church's mission is, hopefully, you would say, "We are becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together."

What if I were to ask you, "What is the mission of the EFCA—the Evangelical Free Church of America?" If you google the EFCA website, you'll find the mission statement right there on the front page. *We exist to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches among all people.*

This isn't a sermon about the EFCA or a commercial for the denomination. However, I want you to notice how that statement echoes the words of Psalm 96. Let me read v. 3 one more time.

"Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples"
(Psa. 96:3, NIV).

God's people are invited to declare God's glory. Last Sunday I preached about the fourth G of our Discipleship Pathway: Go. As I said last Sunday, whether God calls you to declare his glory locally or globally, God's people are called to go. We are called to declare his glory among the nations. We are to go and declare that God has done marvelous things.

One of my favorite church memories from when I was a kid is singing the hymn *Earth and All Stars* on a Sunday morning. It's not one we sing here often, but it is number 357 in our hymnal. At my church, we had a big sanctuary, and in the back, way up in the balcony was a huge pipe organ. I loved it whenever our organist played. The sound of those pipes filled that space. There were times when you could feel the vibrations and almost had to cover your ears.

When I read the second half of Psalm 96 I can almost hear the sound of the organ blasting out this incredible hymn. I won't sing it, but here are a few of the lyrics.

*Earth and all stars! Come rushing planets! Sing to the Lord a new song!
Oh, victory! Order from chaos! Sing to the Lord a new song!*

*Hail, wind, and rain! Come, blowing snowstorms! Sing to the Lord a new song!
Flowers and trees! Soft rustling dry leaves! Sing to the Lord a new song!*

*Trumpet and pipes! Come, clashing cymbals! Sing to the Lord a new song!
Harp, lute, and lyre! Low humming cellos! Sing to the Lord a new song*

He has done marvelous things, I too will praise him with a new song!

What I love about this hymn is that with each verse, all of creation is called upon to sing to the Lord. Even the instruments God gives us skill to make and play are to be offered to him in worship.

Psalm 96 beginning in verse 7 says,

“Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns.” The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness” (Psa. 96:7-13, NIV).

The psalmist uses poetic language to describe the joyous praise and worship offered by the heavens and the earth, the sea and its creatures, and the fields and the forest.

What does it sound like when creation praises the creator? I’m sure you can think of a time when you heard creation singing about the glory of God. The sound of the ocean pounding the beach. The sound of crickets, cicadas, and frogs singing on a summer evening. The sound of fresh snow crunching under your feet in the middle of winter.

What the psalmist describes in verses 11-13 is what he invites God’s people to do in verses 7-10. We are invited to **give God the glory due his name**.

Like the sing, sing, sing found in verses 1-2, the psalmist says in verses 7-9,

“Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and

come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth” (Psa. 96:7-9, NIV).

The word *ascribe* simply means *give* or *bestow*. God’s people are invited to ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. They are to give him the glory due his name. The worshiper is told to “bring an offering and come into his courts” (Psa. 96:8).

To better understand what it means to give God the glory due his name, it might be helpful to consider the opposite. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome about the good news of the gospel, he first addressed their fundamental problem. This is what Paul had to say about our failure as sinners to give God glory.

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom. 1:18-23, NIV).

You might not be someone who fashions wood or stone into an idol made in the form of a bird, animal, or reptile, but as the reformer John Calvin famously said, “The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.”

If God’s glory is paramount, if we are to ascribe to LORD the glory due his name, then we should ask God to expose our idols. We were made to worship. The question is, who or what is the object of our worship?

Psalm 96 is an invitation. It’s an invitation for God’s people to consider his glory. It’s an invitation for us to declare the glory of God. It’s an invitation to give God the glory due his name. Our church’s core values empower and guide our ministry. By God’s grace, may we continue to be a church that values the glory of God above all things.