



**Saint John United Methodist Church**  
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**Message for December 6, 2020**  
**“Signs: Glory”**  
**Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb**  
**Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10**

## **A Rare Alignment**

I remember hearing so many years ago that the Star of Bethlehem was the result of the planets Jupiter and Venus aligning. Their combined brightness provided the way for the Magi to visit the Christ child.

For a young guy just getting into science that all seemed very exciting.

I don't know whether you know it or not, but we are in for a treat this Advent. On December 21, just after sundown, we will be able to see a rare alignment of Jupiter and Saturn. Their coming together in this way is called a conjunction.

The two planets align this way every 20 years or so. This year though they will only be separated by 0.1 degree, an occurrence the world hasn't seen since the Middle Ages—1229 to be exact. That's just under 800 years.

The two will come together to provide a great light in the sky. Let me encourage you to turn your gaze to the night sky here in a couple of weeks. In fact, let me encourage you to turn your gaze to the night sky on a regular basis.

Whenever I do, I am at once reminded of the vastness of God's creation. More importantly, I am reminded of the One who is behind it all. God's handiwork in all its glory is on display.

Psalm 19 puts it this way, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.”* Psalm 19:1-2

The prophet Isaiah also talks about God's glory and does so pointedly in writing about the joy of the redeemed. His focus is not so much on the heavens, but on all that is going on around him. The glory of the Lord is all around us as well. It comes to us to have eyes to see and ears to hear, particularly this season of the year when we are looking for such things more so than at other times.

Let's hear then this reading from Isaiah 35:1-10, a passage that points to signs of things to come.

*The desert and the parched land will be glad;  
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.  
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;  
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.  
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,  
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;  
they will see the glory of the LORD,  
the splendor of our God.*

*Strengthen the feeble hands,  
steady the knees that give way;  
say to those with fearful hearts,  
"Be strong, do not fear;  
your God will come,  
he will come with vengeance;  
with divine retribution  
he will come to save you."  
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert.  
The burning sand will become a pool,  
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.  
In the haunts where jackals once lay,  
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.  
And a highway will be there;  
it will be called the Way of Holiness;  
it will be for those who walk on that Way.  
The unclean will not journey on it;  
wicked fools will not go about on it.  
No lion will be there,  
nor any ravenous beast;  
they will not be found there.  
But only the redeemed will walk there,  
and those the LORD has rescued will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

## **The Rhythm of Christmas**

There is a certain rhythm to Christmas. For me, the rhythm of Christmas is best demonstrated by the night of Christ's birth. We should not be surprised that God makes his way into the lives of common, ordinary people. I don't know about you, but that heartens me to no end.

You know the story. The angel of the Lord appeared to a group of shepherds tending their flocks by night.

*"The **glory** of the Lord shone around them and they were so afraid."* Luke 2:9

God's glory has a way of intersecting life at the most surprising moments. God has a way of making his presence known, even in the midst of those things that otherwise vie for our attention.

All of us have sheep to tend and we spend a lot of time doing that at the expense of God's glory.

I often wonder about that night when Christ was born. It was "*a holy night*" indeed. The glory of God intersected the otherwise mundane, day to day stuff of life, and made it special.

God has a way of taking the ordinary things of this life and making them extraordinary. The rhythm of Christmas is always marked by the glory of God and then followed by a grateful response.

It stands to reason then that upon Christ's birth a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel and praised God by saying, "**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace for those upon whom his favor rests.**" Luke 2:14

The glory of God was followed by those so struck by that glory giving him glory in return. This is the very rhythm of Christmas. It comes to us then not only to seek God's glory but give him glory in response.

The Westminster Catechism states, "*The chief end of man is to **glorify** God and enjoy him forever.*"

The Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:31, "*So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the **glory** of God.*"

### **God's Glory Is Evident**

God's glory is evident all through scripture. It is always glorious when God presents himself. As we have already mentioned, the glory of God was evident at creation and continues to this day. I cannot look to the heavens without seeing God. I cannot take in the beauty of nature without noticing God's handiwork.

God's glory is all around us.

The angels shouted in Isaiah 6:3, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his **glory.***"

Down through history, God has made himself known in powerful ways.

- God appeared to Moses in the burning bush.
- He led the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
- He approached those same people at Mount Sinai with thunder, lightning, and the blast of a loud trumpet. The whole mountain was covered with smoke and God descended in fire.
- God's glory was surely evident.

### **God's Glory on Full Display**

Much later the Prophet Isaiah in writing about a day of redemption talks about the glory of the Lord coming for all to see. In Isaiah 35:3 he writes, "*They will see the **glory** of the Lord, the splendor of our God.*"

God's glory was on display for all to see.

- The feeble were strengthened.
- Those in need of salvation were saved.
- Sight for the blind was restored and hearing to those unable to hear.
- The lame walked, and not just walk, but leapt for joy.
- A way was provided for those in bondage to return to their homeland.

These things and so much more were a part of God's glorious work in the lives of his people.

### **A Bit of Context**

The context of this great prophecy from Isaiah 35 is the Babylonian Exile of 586 B. C. God had warned his people of judgment to come. Eventually, the Babylonians came and vanquished Jerusalem, sending the residents there off to exile.

It was a horrible time for those who followed God. Eventually though God provided the way for them to return home. The prophet writes in Isaiah 35:8, *"A highway will be there, and it will be called the Way of Holiness."*

In ancient times, roads were open only to those who had made themselves ceremonially pure. Such roads were open only to those ready to worship.

The nation of Judah went through a refining in exile. Their time in Babylon brought them to the place where they would be able to worship and to glorify God's holy name like they had never done before.

Given all that is going on, it could very well be said that we are going through a refining fire as well. The pandemic has been something else. We would like to put 2020 in the rearview mirror. We remain ever hopeful, though, that 2021 will be much different.

Hopefully, all that we are going through will refine us and put us at a much better place to give God the glory that is due him.

### **Prepare the Way of the Lord**

The highway Isaiah writes about in chapter 35 is similar to the one he writes about in Isaiah 40:1-5.

*"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for she has received from the Lord's hand double for her sins.*

*Hear the voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.*

*And the **glory** of the Lord will be revealed, and all the people will see it together."*

These are not only the words of the prophet Isaiah, but the words spoken by John the Baptist in proclaiming that the Messiah was about to come—a glorious sign indeed.

In Jesus, God builds a highway that brings redemption to his people.

We have been talking a lot with the kids in Confirmation Class about that redemption. We have been talking about the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God's glory is on full display as he provides the Way for our salvation. I pray that as we make our way through this season, we will walk the highway Isaiah speaks about, giving God glory all along the way.

Prepare the way of the Lord in your own heart, and as you do, give him glory by offering yourself to his way for your life.

## **On Display**

God has always been in the business of displaying his glory. He has always been about redeeming his creation. God does that no more profoundly than when he sends his Son Jesus Christ to save us once and for all.

During this season when all sorts of Christmas decorations are on display, let's not miss God on display as well. God's presence is all around us. God's presence is also in us, and because of that his glory comes shining through.

Think of it, God is on display in you and me. I don't know about you, but that give me pause to glorify him all the more.

So then:

- Let's give God glory for the great things he has done.
- Let's give him glory for the great things he is doing even now
- And above all things, let's give him glory for the great thing he has done by sending Jesus into the life of the world.

## **Glory Sightings**

Have you ever heard of a "*glory sighting*?" I have been a part of groups that have made a regular practice of reporting "*glory sightings*." "*Glory sightings*" are those ways we have seen God at work.

I want to encourage you to list your "*glory sightings*." Take a pen and paper and get to work on that. You will be glad you did.

I did that the other day and before too long I had quite a list. I cannot tell you how much my spirit was lifted. I was given hope for the day and encouragement for tomorrow.

It's all too easy to lose hope these days, isn't it? Let's not fall for that. After all, we are living in God's glory and have every reason to be hopeful.

Hope and glory just go together, like peas and carrots.

- The glory of the Lord gave hope to those in exile so many centuries ago.
- The glory of the Lord gave hope to those who gathered around the manger the night Christ was born.
- The glory of the Lord will give hope to you and me as we continue to meet out the days ahead.

Glory to God in the highest.