

**The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory (Scottish Reformation Sunday)**  
**Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 22, 2022**  
**Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,  
and strips the forest bare;  
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"*  
*The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;  
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.*  
*May the Lord give strength to his people!*  
*May the Lord bless his people with peace!* (Psalm 29:9-11, NRSV)

What a wonderful day of celebration last Sunday was, as we celebrated our 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a congregation! So many were here to give thanks for God's faithfulness, and to fellowship with one another again. It was a day that will live on in our affection for a long time to come. Again, thanks to all of you who helped make it a day to remember!

Now, today, we celebrate a *different* dimension of our heritage – no less important in the grand scheme of things, but a little further removed perhaps – that of Scottish Reformation Sunday. Not all of us are Scottish in our ancestry (though many of us *are* in part, even if we don't know it), but what is certainly true is that the faith tradition in which we stand as Presbyterians is one thoroughly rooted in the Scottish "Kirk." The Presbyterian church in this country – in its theology, practices, and sensibilities – uniquely stands in a direct line of spiritual descent from Scottish and Scots-Irish Presbyterians who brought their faith and their way of "being the church" to these shores and left a distinctive mark that has never been erased.

The Presbyterian tradition, of course, has its ultimate roots in the Reformed trajectory of the Protestant Reformation, stemming from the seminal thought of the French reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), who was based in Geneva, Switzerland, from which his highly impactful ideas spread quickly throughout Europe, taking root in the Netherlands, England, and most of all, in Scotland, under the leadership of the reformer John Knox.

It was from all three of these places that Reformed ideas came to *these* shores, but most influentially from the Puritan settlement of *New England* in the early to mid-1600's ... and the Scots (coming both from Scotland and Scottish settlements in Northern Ireland), flowing steadily into the mid-Atlantic states, the South, and the American backcountry in the 1700's.

But for all their similarities of theology, these two different groups of immigrants organized themselves in quite different ways, and so here we can speak of a specifically *Presbyterian* way of "being church." You see, the New England Puritans were *Congregationalist* in their church governance, meaning that their churches were governed by the direct vote of congregation members – a kind of direct democracy. And while such churches in a given area did often

communicate with one another and sometimes engage in matters of shared concern, there was no larger denominational structure to which individual congregations owed allegiance.

By contrast, the Scots went about church governance differently. They called theirs a *Presbyterian* form of church government, which, naturally, may raise some questions for us – aside from how to spell it. Where does the name come from? What does the word “Presbyterian” even mean? What kind of thing are we talking about?

The word is derived from a Greek word used many times in the original text of the New Testament – *Presbuteros* – from which we get the English word “Presbyter,” meaning “Elder.” So then, a *Presbyterian* Church is a church that is governed, not by the *direct* vote of the people, but by elected elders, individuals chosen *by* the people for their wisdom, leadership, and spiritual maturity ... a kind of *representative* democracy, operating on multiple tiers of organization.

It represents a distinctive approach to church governance. It is not government based on allegiance to popes, or bishops, or singularly charismatic persons, or for that matter, government by the direct vote of congregations. It is authority invested neither in a single person, nor in the mass of the people directly, but rather in *elders who are themselves chosen by the people*.

Think of other Christian traditions of which you may be aware, and you may note that most other Christian churches are in fact organized and governed differently. You may also note a peculiar similarity to the way the United States government is organized. Hold on to that thought, because I’ll return to it in moment.

And so, it is through the Scots that the specifically Presbyterian tradition in this country is derived – the Presbyterian Church being organized in Philadelphia in 1706 by ministers of Scottish and Scots-Irish background, and spreading quickly into western Pennsylvania, down the valley of Virginia, and into the Carolinas and beyond. It’s not an accident at all that the largest presbyteries in our denomination, even today, are in places like Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Charlotte, and Atlanta – wherever the Scots went and were especially well-represented.

And wherever they went, they brought their distinctive way of being the church and being Christian – a life of faithful engagement with the world ... not splitting life into two separate spheres of the spiritual and the worldly, of Sunday matters on one hand and rest-of-the-week matters on the other, but engaging the *whole* of life – the spiritual, the material, the personal, and the social – as if it were all encompassed by the sovereignty of God.

It’s probably not too much to say that this doctrine of the Sovereignty, or rule, of God – though interpreted in different ways – has been the sun around which everything else in the Reformed and Presbyterian theological universe revolves. When we say that God is “sovereign,” we mean that all things are under God’s rule and control, and that nothing happens without divine direction or permission. God’s purposes are all-inclusive and never thwarted; nothing takes God

by surprise. The sovereignty of God is not merely that God has the power and right to govern all things, but that God does so everywhere, always and without exception.

It is certainly true that in more recent times, this doctrine has been the subject of much re-thinking in the face of intellectual and moral challenges to it in light of our experience of egregious evil and suffering. But it is also true that deep in the Presbyterian heart is the conviction that somehow – in spite of everything – God really is working out the Divine purpose in and through all events, even if we have no idea how that could be. We all struggle with reconciling God’s goodness and power with our own experiences of suffering and pain, but we take comfort from that most Presbyterian of all scripture verses, from the Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28, NRSV)

And this deep conviction of God’s sovereignty is not just about world events or the events in our lives, but extends to our salvation as well. Running deep in the Presbyterian soul is the conviction that whenever and wherever salvation happens, it is *God’s doing*, *God’s initiative*, *God’s grace* which accomplishes what we could not on our own.

And so, for us, the life of faith then is not a life in *pursuit* of salvation, trying to earn one’s way into God’s love, but rather, a life of gratitude for a salvation already given. It is a life lived in deep awareness of God’s ever-present grace. It is that grace which frees us to will and to do God’s will, and thereby honor God in *all* of life – in our relationships, in our families, in our work, and in our public service.

You could call this ethos an intentional *this-worldliness*, for if God is sovereign in and over all things, and if the whole of our lives is to honor and glorify God, then that also means that our lives in the world are to reflect this purpose. We are to engage our culture and society and seek to bring about their transformation in the light of God’s love and justice.

Presbyterian faith strives to take the world as seriously as God does in Jesus Christ ... it strives to live as thoroughly in the world as Jesus himself did ... strives to follow him obediently into the world that he loves. Some Christian traditions could perhaps be accused of being so focused on the hereafter that it seems life in *this* world doesn’t matter. But no one would ever accuse a real Presbyterian of this. Presbyterians have always sought to relate faith and culture, faith and society, and bring glory to God in all of it.

And therefore, It shouldn’t be surprising that Scottish Presbyterians were at the forefront of the American Revolution – it being referred to once in the British Parliament as “that Presbyterian rebellion.” The idea that God is sovereign *is* a revolutionary one – for if *God* is sovereign, then *no human* ruler or institution is. All are finally answerable to the One who truly *is* sovereign.

While it would be too much to say that our country’s system of government was simply copied from the Presbyterian model, it is fair to say that both reflect a core concern: to resist tyranny in the name of God ... both the tyranny of too much power in the hands of one fallible human

being (such as a King, a Pope, or a President) and the tyranny of a mass mob. Both systems of governance seek to spread power around – given our human frailties – and to cultivate a common life of liberty under law.

Scottish-American Presbyterians epitomized this deep engagement with the world and so served, and still serve, as an inspiration for generations of faith-inspired folk seeking to address the great issues in our common life ... from racial justice to struggles for peace, from the pursuit of equal opportunity to acts of resistance against oppression. Efforts at community uplift, social justice, and policy advocacy are central to our tradition's understanding of what we are called to do.

Of course, as fallible human beings, we often fail to get things right, even with the best of intentions, and our spiritual forebears were no exception. They had blind spots, but what they *could* see and *did* see has given future generations – has given *us*, who are striving to be faithfully engaged disciples – a means and a drive to see better and to do better, as God gives it to us to see and to do what is right.

And so, trusting in that divine guidance, we pray today for new, Spirit-empowered life as we both await and work for God's Dream to be fulfilled. And so, we pray in the moving words of one of Scotland's greatest Presbyterian churchmen of the last century, the Rev. George MacLeod –

*Holy Spirit, Enlivener:  
breathe on us, fill us with life anew;  
In your new creation, already upon us,  
breaking through, groaning and travailing,  
but already breaking through,  
breathe on us.  
Till that day when night and autumn vanish  
and lambs grown sheep are no more slaughtered:  
and even the thorn shall fade  
and the whole earth shall cry Glory  
at the marriage feast of the Lamb.  
In this new creation, already upon us,  
fill us with life anew.*

To the Glory of God! Amen.