

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, January 30, 2022
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

“The Ways of Life and Death...”

**First of four sermons in a series on
the United Church of Christ’s Statement of Faith in the form of a Doxology
entitled “Faith Leading to Doxology and Transformation”**

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 52:7-10

Ever since I have been a Christian, I have always thought it incongruent that God wanted to be praised. If God is so powerful and good, why would God need praise? It doesn’t make any sense. Humans, in general, admire humility. Sycophancy directed at mortals is lamented. Why would it not also be for a divine being?



I have recently learned that praising God is not necessarily for God. God doesn’t need praise. Praising God is actually for me; it’s for us. Praising God is an expression of my love for God and therefore it is an *act of affirming oneself*. To praise God is to praise all of Creation, of life itself, and thus the praise is for me and you because, well, God made us.

Printed in your New Century Hymnal, number 885, is the “United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology”.



Doxology is a Greek word that means ‘saying glory’ or an ‘expression of praise to God’.¹ A greater doxology in Latin begins with *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the highest). A lesser doxology, also in Latin, is *Gloria Patri* (or, glory to the Father). When we had an offertory in worship, we sang a doxology, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow...”.² Remember? So, a doxology is a liturgical expression of praise to God, often sung. I pray you all read the quotation by Sam Storms included in this past Thursday’s *eNews* that read “The ultimate goal of theology isn't knowledge, but worship. If our learning and knowledge of God do not lead to the joyful praise of God, we have failed. We learn only that we might laud, which is to say that theology without doxology is idolatry. The only theology worth studying is a theology that can be sung!”

For four weeks we will explore our denomination’s, the United Church of Christ, Statement of Faith in the form of a Doxology. We will divide the statement

¹ “doxology”, Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/doxology>, accessed January 29, 2022.

² “Doxology meaning”, <https://www.yourdictionary.com/doxology>, accessed January 29, 2022.

into four stanzas, the first two on which I will preach and the last two on which Matt Deen and Roger Brown will preach.



I would like to preface this sermon series by stating that the United Church of Christ's statement of Faith is an articulation of orthodoxy, that is 'right belief' or 'authorized' or 'accepted belief'. Yet, our faith tradition, Congregationalism, and our local church, Centre Church, does not require nor does it enforce 'right belief'. We may differ with orthodoxy. I often do. And the more we learn about Christian history, the more we learn that orthodoxy was not always orthodox and many of our Christian heroes were not orthodox.

The original and thus traditional United Church of Christ statement of faith was adopted in 1959 by General Synod and is widely regarded as one of the most significant Christian faith testimonies of the twentieth century. The Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, which we are exploring, was authorized by Executive Council in 1981.³

³ The original version was adapted by Robert V. Moss.

"Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ", United Church of Christ (home, what we believe, worship), found at: <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/>, accessed January 29, 2022.

Let us read the first stanza found as a meditative quote at the top of your worship order

"We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify: You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death."⁴

Before we dig into this, I wish

to confide with you a bias I have. I value 'right practice' more than 'right belief'.



orthopraxy

Matt Deen once taught us about orthodoxy, 'right belief', and orthopraxy, 'right practice'. Right belief can and often does lead to right practice – but not always.

Many people confess Jesus Christ as their 'Lord and Savior', yet do not agree with much of what Jesus taught and they certainly don't practice it! So, in this series we examine belief, but we emphasize practice. I am in disagreement with Martin Luther – I affirm the author of the book of James who wrote "What does it profit,

my [friends], if someone says he [or she] has faith but does not have works? [...]

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”.⁴

Our doxology begins with God, the Godhead. Notice that God is not a ‘he’. Some of you may prefer, as Jesus did, that God be a ‘father’ – that’s is fine. In our doxology, God is not a ‘being’. Instead, God is an Eternal Sprit. That is notable.

Our doxology states that Jesus Christ is also God. No doubt, my Muslim friend will ask me if we Christians are polytheists, if we believe in many gods. I will respond in the negative. Yet, my explanation will be someone tortured, as it has been for sixteen centuries. As I have preached before, some of us have ‘high’ Christologies, seeing Jesus as divine and some of us have ‘low’ Christologies and perceive Jesus as pointing to God, even perfectly.

This morning, I would like us to focus on two statements: “You call the worlds into being [...] and set before each [person] the ways of life and death”. God “calls the worlds into being”.



⁴ James 2:14-26.

Notice that 'world' is plural, and thus it includes the entire universe and the cosmos. Our fragile planet is but one tiny blue orb in the midst of billions of stars and billions of galaxies in a universe that is about 13.7 billion years old.



Our planet is fragile. And human beings, using our God-given intelligence and free-choice have the massive power to alter the planet – for good and for bad. Our statement affirms that God “set before us the ways of life and death”. Gosh, with climate change and the destruction of species and their habitats, isn't that the truth! Proverbs 14:12 reads, “There is a way that seems right to [humans], but its end is the way to death”. I believe this to be true as it relates to humans' altering of the atmosphere, warming of the planet, melting of the icecaps, the rising of the oceans, the polluting of our seas, rivers, lakes, and land, and the extinction of the great diversity of the plant and animal life that God created.



For the prophet Isaiah, the Babylonian army was his people's apocalypse. For chapter after chapter, Isaiah lambasted his people for their sin, for their choosing the ways of death. Isaiah lamented that there are huge consequences for sin. Well, there is no Babylonian army on its way to Vermont. So, is Isaiah, in the Bible, therefore irrelevant? No! They are as relevant as ever!



For Centre Church, climate change and the contamination of our planet is our apocalypse. Eco-cide is our sin. Yet, our scripture reading from Isaiah proclaims, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news!" And whose feet are those? It is Margo's feet! Margo's feet bring us hope for our future. Her efforts are modest, yet they are everything to me and they should be to you as well. I encourage all of you to read her weekly "Climate Wake-

Up” broadcasts that facilitate the prominence of God’s Creation on our consciences. I beg all of you, if need be, in the name Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to join Margo’s group that I pray will grow so large as to soon need to meet at the church. Margo is living-out the faith of our wider church when it stated in 2007 “[we] admit Christian complicity in the damage human beings have caused to the earth’s climate system and other planetary life systems, and urges recommitment to the Christian vocation of responsible stewardship of God’s creation, and expresses profound concern for the pending environmental, economic, and social tragedies threatened by global warming, to creation, human communities, and traditional sacred spaces”.⁵



Our scripture celebrates the ‘watchmen’ who lift-up their voices, one of whom is Matt Deen, who presence with us is a gift as he brings warning,

⁵ “A Resolution on Climate Change 2007 GS26”, United Church of Christ, found at: https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/washington-dc-office/washington-dc/environmental-ministries/justice_environmental-justice_index/environmental-ministries_synod-resolutions_a-resolution-on-climate/, accessed January 29, 2021

knowledge, and hope. Matt Deen inspires us to live-out our denomination's faith as stated in a recent resolution that calls upon churches to "Preach every six weeks often on Earth Justice," "ritualize environmental grief," and "start environmental grief support groups".⁶

My prayer is that Centre Church will enable, as Isaiah proclaimed, "all the ends of the earth to see the salvation of our God" (52:10) in the salvation of our planet. There is no gospel if there is no climate change action.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"

⁶ Jeffrey Walton, "'Who Will Speak for the Trees?' Asks United Church of Christ Resolution", *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion & Democracy's Blog*, July 13, 2021. Found at: <https://juicyecumenism.com/2021/07/13/who-will-speak-for-the-trees-united-church-of-christ/>, accessed January 29, 2022.