

Community

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it is the month of September, and I don't have to tell you, everything is ramping up right now. There's a lot going on, a lot launching. School is underway. Sort of feels like the year starts for many of us in the D.C. area in September. And so, we treat these weeks in September as launch weeks. A lot of our programming kicks off, and we typically use these few weeks in September as a time to revisit who we are, why we're here as a church. And so, that's what we're doing this year. Last week, this week, and the next week, we're looking at who we are, why we're here.

Church of the Advent exists to join people to God, to join people to one another, and then to join people to the ongoing work of Christ's renewal that's happening here in D.C. and through D.C., the rest of the world. And last week, we looked at the gospel and how God desires to and makes it possible to have a relationship with Him. How do we become joined to God? This week, we're looking at the second part of this mission statement, joining people to one another. Now, if you're new to our church or unfamiliar with this aspect of our church, it might strike you as odd that one of the three things that we say we focus on. One of the three reasons that we're here is to join people to one another. You might say, well, there's lots of ways that I can join with people. Now, with the internet, there's even more ways to join with people. Why would I need a church to help me join with other people? And why would an institution like the church make that one of the main three things that they focus on with all of their time and energy and money and everything else? This is the work of community formation, but why is it so important? And why is it so important that we would put it in this list of things that we exist to do? And the answer is simply that this vision for community formation in the church didn't actually originate with Church of the Advent. It originates with God.

It's God's original vision for humanity. And it was always God's vision for humanity from the very beginning. And we're going to look at Isaiah chapter 56 this morning, verses 1 through 8.

And what we're going to see here is God's vision for the kind of community that He's building in the world. And we're going to answer two questions. Why does it matter? Why does community matter? And then what is it supposed to look like? And these are things that we're going to reflect on as we think about the church that we are called to be here in the D.C. metro area. Let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for Your ability to speak through it. And I pray that wherever our hearts may be this morning, some of us may feel very close to You. Some of us may feel very far away. Some of us may feel like we are in a place where we belong. We have lots of friends and community here. Others may feel lonely and feel left out or excluded, Lord. Wherever we're coming from this morning, I pray that You would use Your Word to minister to us. Only You can speak to us where we are. Only You know what we need.

We pray that You would do that, and then in ways that only You can, You would use Your written Word to bring us into the embrace of Your living Word, Jesus Christ. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

[3 : 22] So, community, God's community, why does it matter? Isaiah chapter 56 verse 1 says, Thus says, Thus says the Lord, thus says Yahweh, Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon My salvation will come and My righteousness be revealed. Now, in the book of Isaiah, when He refers to...when God refers to My salvation, that's a very loaded, complex term. There's a lot behind it that needs to be unpacked. In fact, there's a whole story bound up in this word salvation that has been unfolding throughout history. This is what theologians call salvation history. So, when God says this, what He's really saying is the climax of salvation history is soon to be revealed, right? Therefore, keep justice and do righteousness. So, what's going on here? Well, we have to go back to the beginning of the story to understand what's being said in Isaiah. In the very beginning, God created human beings to bear

His image in the world. For those who are in the adult Sunday school class this morning, this is exactly what we talked about. God created human beings to bear His image in the world, and He tells them to be fruitful and to multiply. Because His vision is that human beings would become this great family that spans the globe, and that this great family that spans the globe would all reflect His image.

And God's vision for humanity is that we would, as this great family, do three things. We would bear His image in the world, we would love God and one another, and we would take care of the world that God made through the various vocations that He had given us. We would create culture and make stuff out of the stuff that God has made. That was God's vision, and then we would do that as a community.

But you get to chapter 3 of Genesis, and you realize human beings decided that we had a better plan in mind. We no longer wanted to live for God's purposes. We wanted to live for ourselves.

We wanted to choose autonomy. Autonomos. We wanted to be a law unto ourselves. Now, living in the postmodern West, we're highly individualistic here in our country and in our society, and you hear that, and I hear that, and we might be inclined to think, well, that's not so bad.

[5 : 43] You know, living for ourselves, deciding for ourselves right from wrong, that doesn't really seem... nobody's died or anything. And then we begin to reflect on the reality of what's happening here. What we need to understand is that God actually created us to live and to work together, that that was God's design from the very beginning, was that we would live and work together with Him and one another in community. And a great analogy is to think of a symphony orchestra.

How is it that an orchestra is able to create such beautiful music? How is it that an orchestra is able to play a symphony together? On the one hand, each musician has their own instrument.

They play their own part. They have a kind of individual identity. But in order to make this beautiful music, they all need to do two things, they need to play their part with their eyes fixed on the conductor, who is God. And they all need to play according to the same sheet music. Everybody has the same sheet music. And so, God's vision was a lot like a symphony orchestra. We all play our individual part in life depending on how God has made us and wired us and the vocation that He's given us.

But we are all meant to live out that vocation with our eyes fixed on the great conductor, who is God. And we live our lives according to the sheet music of God's purposes for us and for the world. And the Bible says that when we all do that, when all human beings are playing their part, looking to the same conductor, playing the same sheet music, we are capable of extraordinary beauty and harmony. And the Bible actually says that all of creation flourishes. This is what the Bible calls shalom. Everybody playing their part and it creates this wholeness, this fullness where creation is doing what it's supposed to do. So, when human beings decide that we want to live for ourselves, that would be like musicians. Imagine these musicians over here. That would be like musicians ignoring the conductor, rejecting the authority of the conductor, tearing up their sheet music, throwing it out, and then starting to make whatever noise they want. So, now if you look at the world, instead of an orchestra, the world is full of solo performers. It's an almost... it's an ever-growing number of billions and billions of solo performances. Everyone performing on their own tiny little stage for their own tiny little audience. And the result is that everything starts to come apart. The relationship between God and humanity starts to come apart. The relationships between people start to break down.

Nations have to be established, and national borders have to be secured and protected, and nations war against other nations over limited resources, and societies are riven by injustice and exploitation and violence and racism and classism and all of the other isms that cause such misery. And we even see this in our closest personal relationships as the song, as the symphony gives way to discord and chaos. We see that in our most treasured relationships. We all want people in our lives who know us and love us, and yet think about your closest relationships, the people that you most love. The path of least resistance in any relationship is to come apart. In other words, if you don't pour time and energy and effort into your relationships, the path of least resistance is that they will come apart.

[9 : 34] Right? So, we have to pour energy into sustaining them. And even the best relationships include conflict and strife, right? This is all because of the discord of the fall. And so, the Bible tells us that this is where it all originates. And it says that this is all a result of the fact that we've chosen to live for ourselves instead of God. Right? That's the fall.

But the story didn't end there. God didn't abandon His plan for this great community. Instead, He begins to build a new community. He comes to Abraham and He says, I'm going to start the creation project over with you. I'm going to bless you. You're going to have a lot of descendants. I'm going to turn them into a great nation. They're going to be my people. And I'm going to bless all of the nations of the earth through this community. This is going to be my community in the world. It's going to be what failed to happen. The first go-around with Adam and Eve, I'm going to start over with you. And yet, we all know the story. If you read again and again, this new community is formed.

They're called Israel, but they fail to be the kind of community that God called them to be. And they fail again and again and again. Instead of blessing the nations, they become like the nations. So, by the time we get to the prophet Isaiah, it all seems pretty hopeless. In the first few chapters of Isaiah, we see that God is looking to this community to be a place of peace and justice, but instead He sees violence and bloodshed and injustice. And He brings judgment on His people.

He allows Jerusalem to be destroyed. And it looks as though the story is going to end in failure. But, as we often see in Scripture, the story doesn't end here, and God doesn't abandon His plan for humanity. So, in the book of Isaiah, God begins to describe this servant, capital S, servant.

This servant who's going to come and do what no other human being has ever been able to do, what no other society has ever been able to do, what Adam failed to do. Isaiah 55 says, this servant is going to establish a new community. This is going to be a community of people who have been forgiven and set free by God's grace. This is going to be a community of people who pick up the song of creation again. They pick up their instruments, and they begin to play while looking to the conductor. They begin to play the sheet music of God's purposes. They begin to live a life where they love God, and they love one another, and they begin to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth by drawing them into relationship with God. And you're reading this, and you're thinking, well, this is amazing. Who is this servant? When's this community going to be established? And for centuries, religious leaders debated and wondered, who is this servant? When is the servant coming?

[12 : 31] What is this community going to look like? And everybody had their idea of when it was going to happen and what it was going to be like. Until one day, a young man enters a synagogue in Nazareth, and as was his custom, he takes the scroll of Isaiah, and he unrolls the scroll, and he finds the place where it talks about this community. And he finds the place where it talks about this servant who is going to make this community possible, and the salvation that this servant is going to bring to the whole world.

And he reads these verses aloud in the synagogue, and then he rolls up the scroll, and he hands it back to the attendant, and everybody is waiting to hear what he's going to say, and he preaches the shortest sermon in history. Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, and everybody's amazed, and they know exactly what he's saying. Jesus Christ is that servant Isaiah promised would come, which means what about the church? The church, the community that Jesus is establishing, the church is the fulfillment of this prophecy in Isaiah. This is the new community described in Isaiah chapter 56, which we heard read a moment ago. We are the Jesus community, the one that Isaiah promised would come. But the story doesn't end there, right? If you keep reading in Isaiah, the final few chapters of Isaiah, you see that this community is established. But ultimately, this isn't just about blessing this community. God's salvation and blessing extends through this community to the whole world. And the vision gets so big that it can only point to one thing, the consummation of all of history, the new creation. So, if you keep reading Isaiah, you see that we as the church have a part to play in the coming of this new creation.

So, we take all of that and we come back to the first verse, right? Do justice and righteousness because my salvation is hand. What's God saying? We're approaching the climax when I'm going to bless the whole world. Now this community has been established. Keep justice and do righteousness and do all of these things that I'm telling you. Why? Because you as the church are meant to be a living preview of the new creation that I'm bringing into the world. When people look at you, they are meant to see a shadow, a hint, a glimpse of what will ultimately be true of the whole world. So, that's why he's saying, do these things, be this kind of community. I want to show the world what I'm doing.

So, that's why our community matters so much. That's why the church is so unique, is the church alone is the only institution that is meant to be a living preview of all that God is doing in the world, right? So, this is why, you know, in the postmodern West, we're so individualistic that we tend to think of salvation as kind of a personal thing. You know, I come, I say the right words to God, God forgives me, and then I get right with God. But the Bible simply doesn't have that category.

The Bible deals with it entirely in terms of community formation. Jesus dies on the cross so that we can be joined into this new community. God is bringing salvation through this new community.

[16 : 07] So, the point is this, if you want to experience this kind of inward renewal, the impact of God's saving presence in the world, if you want to be taken up in the story of salvation, you have to immerse yourself in this new community, which is the church. And, you know, on a very practical level, that doesn't just mean listening to sermon podcasts and worship music in your car or on your headphones.

It means pouring yourself into this community that God is establishing. It means serving and investing time and energy because this is how God works in the lives of His people, right? If you want to experience God's saving presence in your life, it happens through this community that we read about in Isaiah chapter 56. So, that's why it matters so much. What's this community supposed to look like?

What is our community called to look like in the world? This community is meant to present the world, as we said, with an alternative to what they see everywhere else. And God's vision in Isaiah is that people would look at this nation and that nation and these people and those people, and then they would look at His people, and they would see something markedly distinct and different, something that they haven't seen anywhere else, and that they would be drawn in like mauls to a flame, right? They would be drawn in. They would be captivated by the beauty of what they see among God's people. So, what is it supposed to look like? Well, here's some of the marks of this new community. Isaiah 56, 1 through 8 is almost like a charter, right? Here are the qualities that mark this community as distinct. Number one, in the rest of the world, it may be normal for there to be immorality, injustice, and oppression. In the rest of the world, it may be normal for the strong to trample the weak. Not so in my community, God says. He says, when people look at my community,

I want them to see justice and righteousness. You know, these two words translated justice and righteousness, they're paired together dozens of times in Scripture. And together, they call for two things that we don't often see held together these days, personal holiness and social justice.

And the relationship between these two is explained by the Bible scholar Alec Mateer. He says it this way, he says, righteousness means being in right relationship with God and therefore being committed to putting right all other relationships in life. My vertical relationship is put right, and I am therefore, as a part of that, I am compelled to put right all horizontal relationships in my life, in my family, in my friendships, in my neighborhood, in my city, in the world.

[19 : 00] And it's important to note that because typically these days in our society, churches tend to emphasize one over the other, which is very easy to do. It's, you know, there are some churches that tend to emphasize personal holiness and the need for preaching the gospel and seeing people put in right relationship with God and then living righteous lives as a result. But those same churches tend to get pretty uncomfortable when we talk about social justice, because the word justice can mean so many different things and not all of them biblical. And so, it's easier to avoid that language.

On the other hand, there are churches that tend to emphasize social justice, and they tend to get uncomfortable with the language of personal holiness, because it can often sound pious and judgmental, and so it's easier to avoid it. And so, I think what we need to understand when we read passages like Isaiah 56 is that justice and righteousness, if we understand what these two words mean together, we realize that we can't have one without the other, right? We can't have a right relationship with God unless we're seeking justice and caring for the fatherless and the widow and the immigrant in our midst. You can't seek true justice if you're not devoted to God's definition of justice and His desire for holiness among His people. They need each other. They're mutually dependent on one another, and so we need both. So, that's the first thing. God says, injustice and oppression may be normative out here, not so in my community. I want people to see justice and righteousness.

Number two, God says, in the rest of the world, it may be normal for people to be slaves. And you say, I'm not a slave. I know that there are slaves, but I'm not a slave. Well, it may be normal for people to work all the time, to be slaves to money or career or productivity, to be tyrannized by our taskmasters in our pockets. But God says, when people look at my community, I want them to see people who live in freedom. When people look at my community, I want them to see people who keep my Sabbath. And you say, well, that's kind of a weird thing to focus on. Of all the things that you could say, keep my Sabbath, what we need to understand is keeping the Sabbath is a shorthand way of talking about a lifestyle of covenant faithfulness, right? So, here is a Sabbath keeping lifestyle. People who place their highest priority on worshiping God on the Sabbath, and then they structure the rest of their week around that. People who are willing to make less money, who are willing to be less productive, who are willing to risk being passed over for promotions because their priority is on their relationship with God and their family and their kids and their friends.

A Sabbath keeping lifestyle means rejecting the breakneck speed, the fast-paced lifestyle. It means ruthlessly eliminating hurry, to quote the title of that book. It means a lifestyle that God prioritizes rest and spiritual health and comes out of a place of rest. And you say, well, that sounds entirely unrealistic. You don't know anything about my life. God is saying, yeah, it is unrealistic because it's normative to do the opposite. That's the thing that sets this community apart. And by the way, this doesn't just mean doing this for ourselves in our own lives. It means ensuring part of Sabbath observance in the Old Testament is making sure that the people around you are able to live this way as well.

It particularly talks about servants and hired hands. Make sure they're not working either. You know, so a number of you are in leadership positions in your organizations. You know, entrepreneurs, you have people working for you, you started businesses, you're working, you're leading and managing teams, and you have direct reports.

[22 : 57] This means being the kind of community where if you're in a position of influence and you're over managing other people or leading other people, it means that you don't push them to work all the time.

You don't squeeze every drop of productivity out of them that you can. You don't create a culture in your workplace that rewards people who work seven days a week, nights and weekends. It means that you actually create a culture in your workplace that allows people to rest and spend time outside of work. You allow them to take the time off they need to be with their family, to be with their kids, right? If somebody's sick, you give them the flexibility to do that. All of that is implied. God says, when the world looks at my community, I want them to see those kind of people, those kind of workplace cultures. Number three, in the rest of the world, it may be normal for communities to exclude others for all kinds of reasons.

But God says, I want my community to be a radically inclusive community to all who desire a relationship with me. You know, there's a lot of talk about inclusion, but God says the only way we can be truly inclusive is if it's people who are completely devoted to me. The only way we can truly welcome in the nations is if those nations allow me to welcome them into my presence first.

And He gives two examples of people who would have been treated like outsiders at the time this was written, two sort of primary examples of people who would have been excluded, eunuchs and foreigners.

Eunuch is a kind of catch-all term for people who are not called to marriage and family for a variety of reasons. Jesus in Matthew chapter 19 actually refers to different kinds of eunuchs. Some are eunuchs by choice. They have chosen essentially career over family. They've said, I want to focus on my career.

[24 : 58] I don't have time for marriage and kids. I'm going to focus on my career. So, in the ancient days, there were certain positions in the highest positions of power that you could only attain if you allowed yourself to be castrated as a man. And so, people would say, okay, I'm going to do that.

Sometimes it was forced upon them, but many other times they did it by choice because they wanted to attain those highest positions of power. So, this would be people who have chosen family, chosen career over family. Some are unmarried even though they really want to be married.

You know, some live in kind of unwanted singleness. Some have been born with certain conditions that mean they're not going to get married or they can't have kids. And then others, Jesus says, they're actually single by choice. They're single like Jesus was single. They're single like Paul, the apostle Paul was single. They're single because they want to devote themselves exclusively to the work of the kingdom of God. And so, God is saying to all of these people, to all of these who lived in a world, by the way, where if you didn't have a nuclear family, you were thought of as a total failure. It was like a death sentence. Your only legacy, your only way of having significance was your children, your offspring. That's where all of your meaning was to be found.

But God is saying to all of these people, this is the place for you, right? If you fall in any of those categories, this is the community for you. If you don't have a nuclear family, in the church, you're going to find spiritual moms. You're going to find spiritual dads. You're going to find spiritual brothers and sisters and sons and daughters and aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews. You're going to find all of the family members you could ever want. If you feel like your life is meaningless because you've not been able to have kids for whatever reason, God says, I can give you a name better than sons and daughters. What He means by that is, I can give you a source of significance. I can give your life meaning in a way that goes way beyond sons and daughters in this community. You know, there are many in our culture these days who increasingly see the nuclear family as an outmoded way of doing life.

And so, there's a push now, a growing push, to sort of abolish the nuclear family as normative. So, for some... and I've heard some people in our church have sort of said, you know, when I go to work, being married with kids feels archaic. I feel like I'm old-fashioned because I'm married and have kids.

[27 : 24] And it feels like an outmoded way of life. But then also, in churches, there can be this swing way far in the other direction where there's this overemphasis on marriage and family as the only viable way to be a fully formed adult, right? Where if you're single, then you're sort of treated... you're kind of not a kid, but you're not treated like a fully formed adult. You're sort of in a... you're on deck for adulthood, but you've got to find somebody to marry, right? Now, nobody would say that, but I think in a lot of churches, that can be the implicit message. And I think this is saying that in the church, we need to push against both errors. We need to be a community, on the one hand, where marriages are supported and strengthened, where godly parenting is promoted and encouraged, right? But on the other hand, we need to be a church where singleness is upheld as a complementary and, in fact, necessary, and if you were to ask the Apostle Paul, maybe even preferable calling that exists alongside marriage, that it's not just a step on the way to adulthood, that it's its own calling, whether for a season of life or for all of life, and that the church needs to operate in a way that recognizes that. And the church needs to have a vision of community that says, actually, we need each other. We need to be in one another's lives. We need to be involved in one another's day in, day out, right? Married people with kids benefit from having single people in their lives and around their dinner tables. Single people benefit from having married people in their lives. You know, I'm somebody, if you know anything about me, I got married when I was 30, and for much of my kind of late teens, early 20s, I had this deep fear of getting married because of some of the experiences

I had growing up and my sense of marriage from that. And the thing that God used to heal that in me and to give me a vision for what marriage could be was several married couples who I became friends with through church and seminary who just opened their doors to me. And so, for several years, I just got a front seat to these marriages. I got to see fights. I got to see squabbling with kids.

I got to see parenting. I got to see people who love each other and live life together. I got a vision for what it could be like, and that deeply healed my whole sense of things. I overcame my fear of marriage and commitment, and I think that's how God prepared me to enter into marriage with my wife and parenting with my kids. God used those married couples in my life. And so, I've personally experienced the benefits of that, and I see again and again and again in our community the beauty of people, regardless of whether you're grandparents, parents with young kids, married with no kids, single by choice, single not by choice, that all the different people in the different lifestyles, the more we are intermingling, the more we are sharing our tables and our lives with one another, the richer and the deeper and the more, I think, like the Isaiah 56 community we will be.

And then we have this final category of foreigners. Just a couple of minutes left, but we've got to talk about this category, this example. You know, at one point in history, Israel was an ethnic group.

They were a nation state. But God is saying that was just one point in history. The ultimate purpose of Israel, as salvation history unfolds, all of the racial and ethnic barriers are going to come down.

[30 : 47] This new community that God's building in the world is a multiracial, multicultural, in fact, if you look at Revelation, even multilingual community of people who are all devoted to Him from every tribe, tongue, and nation. And God is saying when people look at the church, when they look elsewhere, when they look elsewhere, they may see racial division and people sorting into smaller groups based on class or ethnicity. But when they look at the church, I want them to see a beautiful community. I want them to see a community unlike any they've ever seen anywhere else.

I want the church to inspire imaginations and to give people a vision of what race relations can look like. Now, that doesn't just mean a culturally white church becoming more diverse by attracting a certain percentage of non-white attenders. That's not the vision that's in Isaiah 56.

This is a vision of deep integration, of deep community, where there's profound equality. This means doing the hard work of understanding the dynamics of race in our community. It means understanding the history and the way that this continues to impact lives today. You know, it means the willingness to enter into really hard, difficult relationships where we're going to be challenged to reflect on things that are highly uncomfortable. It means a willingness to share power.

It means a willingness to build relationships across lines of difference. It means willing to do a whole lot of listening. It means a whole lot of self-reflection. But this is the vision that God is painting for the world. When you look at my community, I want you to see something you don't see anywhere else. So, in all of these ways, God is calling His new community to present the world with this alternative to what they see in the rest of the world. And you ask, okay, well, what's the application here? Well, does this mean that we just need to get to work? Well, there's more. There's more than that.

This is not something that we can do in our own strength. That's the point, right? This vision feels unrealistic, and that's because if we rely only on ourselves, it is unrealistic.

[32 : 56] In Acts chapter 8, there's a man who is both a foreigner and a eunuch, the ultimate outcast, according to Hebrew culture. And this man's going along. He's an official. He's high up. He works in the halls of power. He's from Ethiopia. And he's reading this part of Isaiah, and he's reading this description of this community, this beautiful community. And he wants to know who is this servant who is making this kind of community possible, the kind of community where a person like me, who desires to worship the Lord, would be welcomed in instead of having the door slammed in my face.

Who's the person who's going to make all of this possible? And so, the Holy Spirit brings Philip to this man as he's going down the road, and Philip tells this man about Jesus. Tells him about the servant, Jesus Christ. And the man says, what do I need to do to be a part of this community? And Philip says, well, you need to be baptized. And so, right then and there, he's baptized.

Now, we think of baptism as just maybe a kind of ceremony that we do, but baptism has a profound meaning. Baptism means that this Ethiopian eunuch is willing to let go of his old identity, right? He's an Ethiopian, not an Israelite, right? He's a eunuch, not married with kids. That's where the dividing lines are drawn. But he's willing to put off the Ethiopian-ness. He's willing to put off the works in the halls of power-ness. He's willing to put off the eunuch-ness of his old identity.

And he's willing to allow those things to be subsumed into this new identity that he gains through baptism, this identity that's rooted in the identity of Jesus Christ. And what we see here is that this kind of community, the kind of community that Isaiah is describing, it's only possible if people are willing to allow those old identities to be subsumed into the identity of Jesus Christ.

All those things continue to define us. They continue to exert an influence on our lives. But the main thing that defines us, the main thing is that I'm in Christ, and you're in Christ, and you're in Christ, and you're in Christ, and you're in Christ, and we're all in Christ.

[35 : 09] And that is how this community is actually attained if we allow Jesus to redefine us. So, this is what this is saying to us this morning. The world is full of solo performers performing on their tiny little stages, everyone living for themselves. But God's vision for the church is that we would take up the great symphony of creation and new creation, that we would turn our eyes to Jesus, the great conductor, and that we would join the music that is already echoing in the halls of heaven. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this community.

It would be easy for our eyes to be drawn to ways that we feel like we might fall short of this. I pray that that would only kindle us, kindle in us a greater hunger and thirst for you.

Lord, I pray that it would, it would whet our appetite and make us hungry to come to this table, that we would receive you in this meal and be strengthened to live out this vision that you have for us in the D.C. area, Lord. And I pray that we would do this with the power of your Holy Spirit, Lord, for our good, but ultimately for your great glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen.