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PRESENTING THE COLORS

It happened every Monday for three months. We arrived on a bus, the fifteen of us. We were early—intentionally early. The bus moved off a ways, as if to hide. The grass was green, the shade trees large. I made sure the one musician moved out of sight behind a tree. I sent seven men to stand several yards behind the chairs lined up on the grass. The other six men and I waited in the sun, by the road.

Then came the cars. Several cars, with one distinctive car in the lead. The six men with me lined up quickly in two rows of three. The lead car stopped next to us. We stood, unmoving, while the people disembarked from the other cars and moved to the chairs. Then the back door of this one car was opened. The six sailors in service-dress blue uniforms, with white web belts and white gloves, stepped forward and began to remove the casket from the back of the hearse. I commanded, “At a half-step, forward... march.” We moved across the grass, very deliberately. As they placed the casket on the special bier over the grave, I moved to my position at the right shoulder of the deceased.

A military chaplain, or maybe a civilian priest or minister, said a few words. Nobody was really listening. Nobody heard what he said. It was enough that he said them. As he stepped back I came to attention and ordered my detail to do the same. Then came the order, “Detail, fold...flag.”

Three sailors on each side of the casket picked up the American flag with which it was draped. With great precision they placed the opposite sides of the flag together, then repeated the procedure. The two men at the foot then began to fold the flag, corner to opposite side, and then upward along the edge that was now across the flag. Slowly, neatly, and with great care, they folded the flag until it was a blue triangle with white stars. As they folded I reached into a pocket and palmed a carefully prepared cardboard box. When the flag was folded and the last white glove tucked in the final edge, the final two men handed me the flag. As I took it, I placed inside the final fold the cardboard box I had taken from my pocket, with twenty-one expended M-14 shells inside.

Executing my crispest left face and turns, I slowly marched to the primary next-of-kin. Perhaps it was a wife; maybe a mother. Stopping before her I gently bent over

and handed her the flag that had draped her loved one’s casket. “This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation in acknowledgement of the service rendered by [rank] [name].” Then I came to attention and slowly raised my hand in salute.

As I did so, the bugler, still in hiding behind a tree, began playing taps. Nobody who has ever been associated with the military is unmoved by those notes, especially at a funeral. As the last note died away I slowly lowered my hand. As I did so, I could hear the command, “Detail, shoulder...arms. Aim. Fire.”

The crack of the first volley of seven rifles always has the same effect. The mourners all jump. The shock breaks down all resolve. The widow/mother, no matter how strong to this point, is finally granted the release of being able to cry. The second and third volleys ring out.

One more round of commands. I do an about face and order, “Detail!” From either side of the casket comes a soft, “Detail, left” or “Detail, right” followed by my command, “Face.” We all turn to face the road. “Forward...March.” We leave the scene to the mourners. Before we leave, however, the rifle squad must police their brass. I need another twenty-one empty shells for the next funeral. There is always a next funeral.

Twenty years later, I am thinking that God’s kingdom should have a flag that we can present at funerals. Then it struck me. I have been to many funerals of Christians. At each one I have seen God’s flag presented in a similar way. “His banner over me was love.” (SOS 2:4) As we show our love to the family of the one who has gone home, we say, “This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful kingdom in acknowledgement of the service rendered by...”

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IN GOD'S HOUSE

When you walk into a house, what you see reflects the owner's personality. If you come into my house, you see a mess. That doesn't mean my life is all messed up; it just reflects that I am too busy or too lazy to clean it up. Some other houses, though, show their owners to be obsessive. The décor is also expressive. The room where I keep my computer and my sewing machine also houses my dragon collection and my pictures honoring my favorite composer, Puccini. Some people decorate in a Southwest motif, others in particular colors. My favorite houses are those where the prominent architectural feature is bookcases. I love to see what books are on the shelves, because that tells me more about the owner than just about anything else could.

God has furnished his house in a particular way. It is beyond anything we can imagine, because God is beyond anything we can imagine. One psalmist acts as a reporter for "Better Deity Homes and Gardens," and gives us a glimpse of the inside of God's house.

Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty. Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like

A matador's "suit of lights" is magnificent in its own way, but God's outer garment is light itself.

a curtain: Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind: Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire: Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever. (Ps 104:1-5)

God's closet

The first thing the psalmist looks at is what is hanging in God's closet. Some newspapers and magazines have gotten complaints recently because a news article might describe what a prominent woman is wearing, but not how men in the story are dressed. Even more so with President Obama in the White House, the interest in fashion has been revived by the

President's wife's wardrobe. People want to know what celebrities are wearing, or these days not wearing. This is not new. This psalmist was part of the trend, thousands of years ago.

So what does the well dressed Creator of the Universe wear? "He is clothed with honour and majesty." Don't ask what those items look like. I can't describe them. But you will know them if you see them.

God is clothed with honor. It seems that this is a pretty desirable garment. Many people who have no other clothing cling to their honor. "A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit." (Prov 29:23) Haman the Agagite should have listened to the wise man. When the king asked what should be done for the man the king desired to honor, his reaction was, "To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?" (Esth 6:6) In so doing he lost the last vestige of his own honor. Not only does God wear honor, but he gives it as a gift as well. In fact, he demands that certain people be given this garment. "Honour thy father and thy mother." (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16; Eph 6:2) It is a pretty important garment, if he expects parents to wear it.

God wears majesty, and he wears it well. Majesty is such a garment that people tremble before the one who wears it. "And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth." (Isa 2:19) Yet God's majesty, as great as it is, is based on simple things. "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things." (Ps 45:3-4) God's majesty is based on truth, meekness, and righteousness. These are things that we can experience. When we walk meekly, in truth, and covered with the righteousness that God imparts, then we can wear the same majesty God does. Our wardrobe can be the same as God's, and not just a cheap knock-off, either.

The uniform of a matador is called a suit of lights. It is magnificent in its own way, but God's outer garment is light itself. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." (1 Jn 1:5) Only one who wears light as his cloak could create the world by saying, "Let there be light." Several of the prophets describe theophanies, appearances of God. A common theme in each of these is light. "I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the

likeness of the glory of the LORD.” (Ezek 1:27-28) “And his brightness was as the light; he had horns coming out of his hand: and there was the hiding of his power. The sun and moon stood still in their habitation: at the light of thine arrows they went, and at the shining of thy glittering spear.” (Hab 4:3,11) God wears light, and is the light of the world. Without God is “outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 22:13)

God’s Interior Decorator

Apparently God is his own interior decorator. He designed his own house, and decorated it the way he chose. So his décor is certainly reflective of his own personality. It is not influenced by outside sources, by another decorator’s personality. His architectural sense is flawless, if he can lay foundations for the earth that cannot be removed forever.

Frank Lloyd Wright has a reputation as being perhaps the greatest architect of modern times. He was famous for incorporating water into his architectural designs. His best-know house is even called “Fallingwater.” Yet even he never attempted an architectural feat perfected by God. Most people think that the beams upholding the ceiling of a house should be mounted on something solid. Even Jesus said that a wise man builds his house upon a rock. God, on the other hand, incorporates water into his design, even mounting the beams of his chambers on the waters. In this he demonstrates that his power exceeds that of all others. It doesn’t matter that God puts his beams from cloud to cloud. If God places it, it will stay put. If God’s architecture will not be moved, regardless of where it is placed, imagine what that means for us. When we look to Jesus, “the author [or architect] and finisher [or contractor] of our faith,” (Heb 12:2) then we can know that nothing can snatch us out of his hand. When God establishes his kingdom, “gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt 16:18)

Many decorators will say that the most important element in a room is the window dressing. The right curtains can make or break a design. Curtains emphasize or hide elements, and may even be used independently of windows. If curtains are so important, imagine the effect of God’s curtains. He stretches out the heavens as his curtain. God doesn’t even require a window. When the curtain shows the changeable sky, who needs a window? How would you like to wake up in a curtained bed, and see clear to the farthest star? That is how God decorates his house.

Furthermore, God has interesting air conditioning. Here in the desert, we try to keep the breeze moving, either by fans or by opening doors and windows. God just calls on an angel to cool his house. “He maketh his angels winds.” If he gets too cold, he has a movable fireplace. He

makes “his servants a flaming fire.” As his servants, we warm the world.

In God’s Garage

Jay Leno is famous, besides for his comedy, for the contents of his garage. He has some very nice cars. And that is an understatement. Yet in all of his garage, Jay Leno does not have an item of transportation that compares to God’s. You see, Jay Leno cannot travel on the clouds, and yet God makes them his chariot. My wife and son like looking at clouds. They may identify a shape in the cloud one moment, and it looks like something entirely different a moment later. Clouds move quickly. What better transportation for the King of the Universe? Not only is it a rapid chariot, it is a beautiful one. And powerful. God’s chariot is more powerful than the fastest Indy car. How many horsepower is a cloud? Who knows? But any tornado victim will tell you that it contains more horsepower than anything man can build.

And if God decides not to ride his chariot, he just walks on the wind. The wind in the Chicago area can get

Even Frank Lloyd Wright
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fierce. The winds in Albuquerque are even stronger. What fun God must have, strapping the wind on like a pair of cross-country skis and striding across the heavens. Not to get anywhere, for God has no need to travel, but just for the exhilaration of riding on the wind! God stores some pretty neat transportation in his garage. As we would put it a number of years ago, God is cool. He is not just another stick-in-the-mud judge of mankind. His garage shows him to be one “fun loving dude.” (Sorry if this description offends, but it is accurate.)

God’s house is an interesting place. If Disneyland claims to be “the happiest place on earth,” then God’s house must be the happiest place out of this world. While Disneyland may charge “an arm and a leg” to get in, God’s house costs more. He wants both arms and legs, and more. His price of admission is your whole life, and maybe even literally your life. But just as some people consider the high price of admission worth it to see Mickey Mouse, the price of admission to God’s house is but a small thing compared to what you get for it. He asks for your life, but once you are in he gives a full refund, with interest. When did the Disney parks ever do that?

A DRIVING MINISTRY

There are many and various tools for ministry. The tools I use are keyboards (computer and MIDI). I know a woman (OK, she's my wife, but don't tell her I wrote about her because I don't have her permission to embarrass her) who uses a different tool for ministry.

Her tool is (currently) blue, although it has been red, white, or green. It has five wheels (one for steering) and seats for up to seven people. Sometimes I get to drive it. When it is used for her ministry, most often she drives. The tool of her ministry is our family car (or van).

Driving has been her ministry for many years. When we were in San Diego there was a woman who attended the assembly where we worshipped. When her husband was deployed away from home this woman avoided getting out of the house at all. Her agoraphobia made it difficult to shop (before online shopping) and she would stop worshipping with the church. My wife's number one rule while the military spouse is deployed is, "You have to get out of the house." So she made it her ministry to make sure that this woman got out, at least to join us for the Sunday assembly. It did not matter that it added several miles to our Sunday drive. So what if we had to leave half an hour earlier than otherwise. We had a car, and could get this woman out of the house. The woman appreciated it, but it would not have mattered had she not.

We have a neighbor who does not drive. Without any family close by, getting around could be difficult for this person. Instead, every Monday she has a ride to the grocery store, lunch, and any other shopping she needs to do. When she cannot get a Monday appointment, my wife gets the car on the day she can get, so she has a ride. I know that this neighbor

is now a subscriber to Minutes With Messiah. I don't know whether they have talked about religion at all beyond that. It really doesn't matter what they talk about. What matters is that someone knows that a Christian is ready and willing to give of her time for someone else.

We often think of ministry as teaching. Certainly teaching is a ministry. Knocking on doors to set up Bible studies is a ministry. But so is knocking on doors and offering to cut the grass or hang the storm windows. Ministry is service. There are many ways we may serve others, but the greatest of these is love. "By this shall all know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:35) Jesus says that judgement is not based on doctrinal purity, but on ministry.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matt 25:34-40)

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