Emmanuel Presbyterian Church

Sermon and Sanctuary

Fall 2026



Sacred Cast Offs

Hebrews 12:1 says that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Interestingly, the great cloud of witnesses were not a perfect bunch, not by a long shot. They proclaimed great truths, and failed miserably. They attempted to come up with a single cohesive story line and theological understanding of God, and simply couldn't do it.

Instead, we have a beautiful, complicated, often tragic collection of testimonies about who God is and how he works. When we consider the testimony of Christian writers across the centuries, we find themes that appear consistent and transcendent, and we also find deep and troubling contradictions.

We also find testimony that has been stricken from the record.

Over the next few months we will explore some of that "great cloud of witnesses" who have had their testimony set aside. I expect these weeks will expose us to writings we are unfamiliar with and that will challenge us to live more authentically into who Christ calls us to be.

The sign above the panels has been created in the style of the blackout poems which will be further explained below.

Christ

The central work is the painting of Christ embracing a follower. This painting provides the balance and foundation for the other works I've created around the sanctuary.

Wherever we find ourselves on our journey, both individually and corporately, it is both wise and comforting to remember that we don't have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses. During low times of hurt and doubt, or the highs of certainty that can veer into arrogance, Christ is present with us grounding us in his love.

We have been promised that if we continue to honestly seek God, he will be found, and that he will be with us on the journey. This painting reminds me that when I fail, when others fail me, when my understanding falls short, God's love and grace is there for all of it.



Swirling Oak Leaves

On the panels we have swirling oak leaves caught in a sudden gust of wind. I wanted to create an image that captures two themes.

The first is, most importantly, the work of the Holy Spirit. The spirit is often compared to the wind, in particular in John 3:8: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

I find the image of the Spirit as wind challenging. My natural inclination is to lean into the warning in James that we shouldn't be tossed here and there which indicates a lack of faith, but should be firm in our beliefs. That, taken to extremes, however, leaves little space for the Spirit to work.

The second idea I was hoping to capture is the emotions that rise up when we honestly consider a perspective that contradicts what we have held as truth. When we open ourselves up to change, our emotions resist. We feel anxious and disoriented, like leaves caught up in a sudden gust.

I have chosen oak leaves for the sanctuary, first because we are in Thousand Oaks and it feels fitting. But also because oak leaves in many ancient traditions connect to deep insight, knowledge, and wisdom.

Taken together my hope is that the front of the sanctuary will provide elements to contemplate throughout the next months.







Blackout Poems

In the soffits we have four black out poems. A blackout poem is a piece of found poetry, created by taking a pre-existing page of printed text and redacting it, or blacking out any unwanted words to reveal a new message or poem. This creative blend of writing and visual art allows an old text to have a new voice.

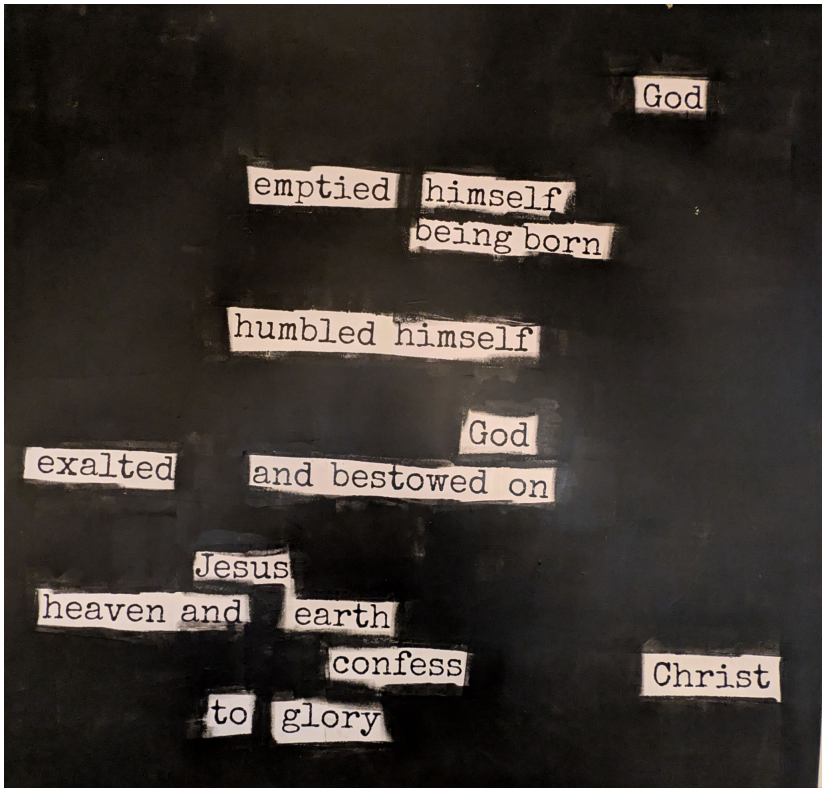
I've had students create black out poems from various pages of novels. I thought it would be revealing to do the same with a section of scripture. Creating blackout poems with Scripture illustrates how our preconceived ideas frame which words stand out to us.

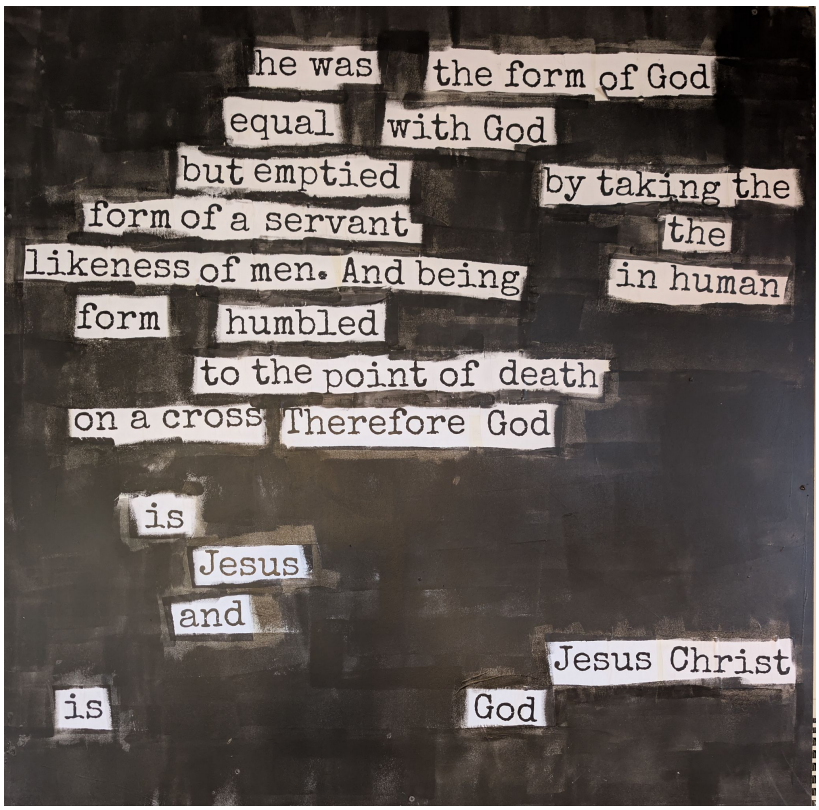
The development of the poems in the soffits came about through a collaboration between Tim Bagdanov, Kelly Quinn, and myself. Tim suggested using the Christ Hymn in Philippians. (Phillipians 2:6-11)

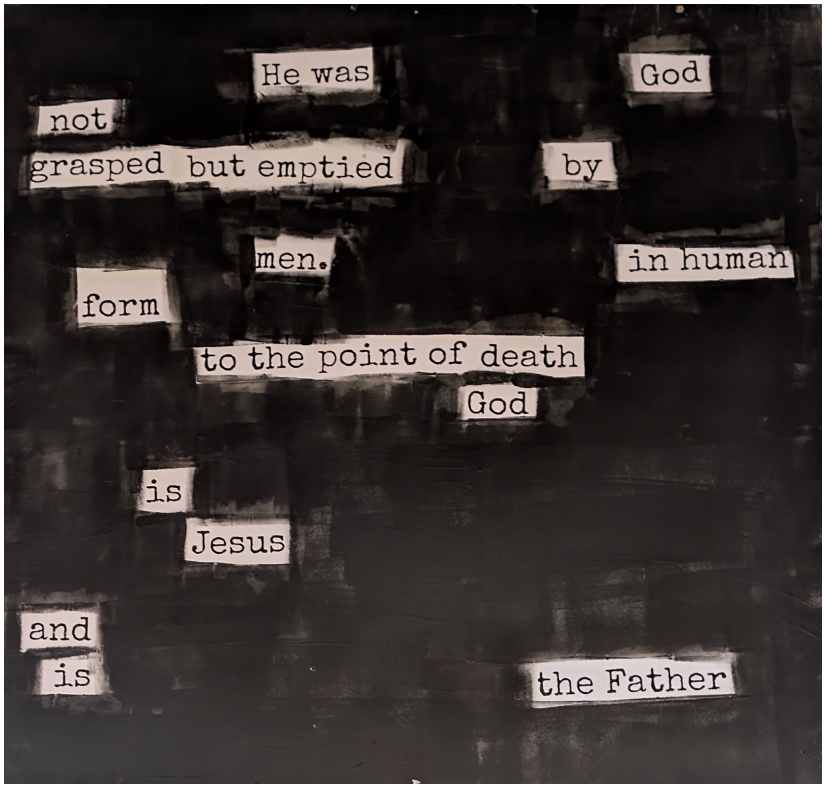
The Christ Hymn is both a foundational text in Christian theology and one of the most debated and scrutinized texts in the New Testament. There are serious translation ambiguities, heretical interpretations, and historical origin questions. The passage invites debate about several aspects of Christology.

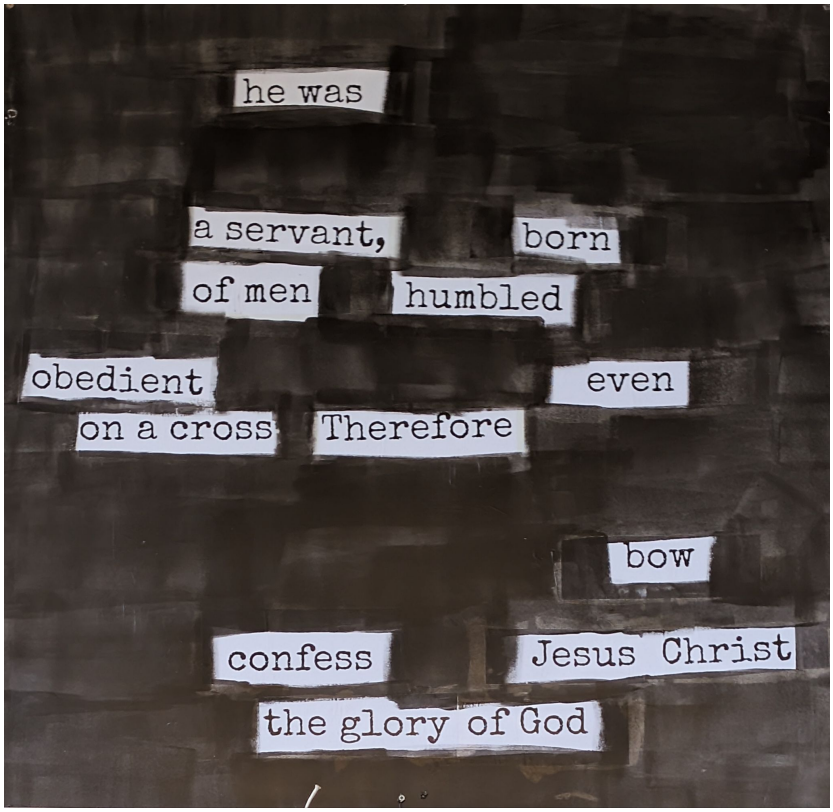
Here is the entire passage.

"Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."


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humbled himself
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