

"A Strange Glory"
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – March 21, 2021

Please Read:
Psalm 51:1-12
John 12:20-33

Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified . . . and when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." This is another turning point in our journey through Lent. In the gospel according to John, Jesus has been telling people that his hour had *not* yet come, but *now is his "hour"* ... and it's a time for *glory!*

Glory is about who we really are, what we live for; for what we are willing to give our lives. Consider, what brings you glory?

The Hebrew word for "glory" is *kabat*, and in the new Testament the word for "glory" is *doxa*. Both of these words imply "weightiness," and splendor. The Hebrew comes from a word that means a rock that sticks out, that can hold your weight... It's what you can really trust.

Your glory is something you can't describe. Rather, it is revealed through your character and actions.

Do you remember the Civil War movie which tells the story of the first Black regiment of the U.S. Army, fugitive slaves and freemen who were willing to die for the cause of freedom? The name of the film, with all of the bloodshed, sacrifice, and death was called, "Glory." Spoiler alert: The 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment got slaughtered at Fort Wagner, but President Lincoln, impressed by their courage, let thousands more blacks fight for the Union, which turned the tide of the war.

Throughout the Bible we read about the glory of God, which is in many ways the revelation through fire and smoke of God's mysterious nature and character. The glory of God is most memorably revealed through God's acts of liberation and redemption. God's name is glorified first in the Exodus. God gives the name, the *tetragrammaton* to Moses, and this is the name above which there is no other. Then, in the famous passage from Isaiah 40 (included in Handel's *Messiah*), "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed..." we hear the lost and broken exile community hoping in the One who would come to save them.

When we get these masks off, we will sing again the doxology and perhaps the Gloria Patri. God's glory is lifted up, so that in worship, all that is below lifts up its praise to our Creator God on high... We read about Jesus being raised by the glory of the Father, that Christ was taken up in glory, Christ will come again in glory.

The architecture of our sanctuary here is growing on me. There is a certain austere glory with the high ceilings and immense cross. I love the predominantly purple-colored glass. It probably has different meanings to different people, but for me, the purple reminds us of the call to repentance. It is the color of the penitential seasons of the liturgical calendar. But it also is the color of royalty, as if to remind us of the glorious King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the fact that we are called beloved children, co-heirs with Christ. One day we will share the full weight of his glory...

We don't write church anthems for the harmonica or kazoo. We put up thousands of pipes. When Victoria wants to make that instrument play to high heaven, she pulls out all the stops. Glorious!

So, am I right in suggesting that we usually think of God's glory as a matter of God's exalted distance and power over us? We are low. God is high. We are creation and temporal. God is Creator and eternal...

But in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus reveals another kind of glory, a strange glory, to be sure... Greeks come wanting to see Jesus. They perhaps have heard of his many signs and wonders. Who is this illustrious worker of miracles? A fairly glorious person, no doubt... Jesus confirms, "The hour has come for me to be glorified." At last, at long last, the Son shall be glorified, thought his politically minded disciples. Enough of this Galilean flesh-and-blood, one-with-the-people schtick. At last Jesus will throw off the cloak of his humanity and reveal his divine "glory." At last is the hour for doxology, for the weighty, illustrious, the high and lifted-up God to reveal the fullness of divine power and might.

But Jesus' announcement is shocking: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies..." Jesus here speaks of divine glory as a seed falling to earth, and dying... *The glory of God here is revealed not in exaltation, but in humiliation; God's stooping down, to the cross.*

The Greeks came saying, "Sir, we would see Jesus." We want to see who is the glorious one come from a glorious God. And they were shown one who spoke of his life as a grain of wheat, dead in the earth, his glory as his death, one who, when struck on the cheek, offered his other tear-stained cheek as well. When we cursed him, he blessed us.

Jesus here gives a new distinction between divine and worldly glory. Those weighted with this world's glory get the most likes and go viral. They do the victory dance on the court after the winning shot. They give you the finger shouting, "We're number one!" They get the spoils of war, or a building named after them. That's worldly glory, and you can tell a great deal about our culture by watching to whom we give glory.

Jesus calls us to a different way. When we want so desperately to find ourselves, Jesus talks about losing ourselves. When we talk about loving ourselves, Jesus talks about hating our lives. Indeed, Jesus challenges us to pursue a different kind of glory!

By the way, I don't think our Lenten discipline is to hate ourselves... What Jesus is suggesting is that you need to learn to hate anything that comes between you and God's calling upon your life. We're all addicts of some kind. We all have our idols. Jesus wants us to hate those idols and addictions to which we give our lives, and which take more and more from us, but give less and less to us. Learn to hate what is taking life away from you and from those around you. Learn to love the Lord your God who gives life... Then you will be able to love your neighbor as you love yourself. It's a paradox to be sure, but sometimes less is more. At least it's liberating! Someone asked John D. Rockefeller how much money is enough. He famously replied, "Just a little bit more..."

Too often we confuse glory with gluttony. It's interesting to me that the single parent who faithfully, quietly raises their children, or the one who loses her job because of integrity, or the parent who doesn't go up the corporate ladder because he puts his family responsibilities first, or the teenager who plays the outsider in order to say no to bullying... They don't receive much praise, do they? - we sing no glory to them...

The church is called to be a community which reflects this strange glory of God, but I have to say, I was disappointed and frustrated by the Vatican's recent decree that same-sex unions are "not ordered to the Creator's plan..." that gay unions are "illicit," and that God "cannot bless sin." Wow. What does that say to the hundreds of millions of LGBTQ people in the world trying to enter covenant unions to give glory to God?

David Brooks had a great article this week about Christian Social Justice. He interviewed Esau McCaulley, a New Testament professor at Wheaton College. McCaulley argues that Christian social justice begins "with respect for the equal dignity of each person. It is based on the idea that we are all made in the image of God. It abhors any attempt to dehumanize anybody on any front."¹

God calls us to let go of any belief system, tradition or practice that takes life away. Wouldn't it be lovely for the church to simply admit, hey, we got some things wrong and need to be more generous and gracious to those who are in the minority? Too often, the church has actively if not passively promoted bigotry and discrimination, creating a second class of church members at best and targets of violence at worst... It's a conundrum, for the church is also the place where we talk about sin and redemption, about what is good and evil. As Dorothy Day wrote, "As to the Church, where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ...? Though she is a harlot at times, she is our Mother."²

So, we come and stand before this massive wooden cross. It is supposed to remind us of how bad our sin really is, but how great God's love is. Jesus enacted glory with basin and towel. In Psalm 51 we read of God willing to wash away our sin. God as laundry worker. You see, the cross, the images that are most glorious are those where God identifies with the outsider, with the lowly and lost. Jesus on the cross took the place of a despised criminal.

Perhaps we need to consider the meaning of the cross again. We live in a world where this week, for example, a young man, the son of a pastor, shoots eight people to death, including six Asian women, in a deranged attempt to remove temptation. He received teaching that led him to believe that violence was going to solve the problem, and that violence against women was going to solve his problem. We are not strangers to sin and suffering. It's not just "out there." Like King David, we are all faced with sin in our lives, and in our world. "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me..." I wonder about that. If asked, could you name your sin? The core flaw that you can't fix? Or do we laugh it off. When asked what he

¹ David Brooks, "A Christian Vision of Social Justice," (*New York Times*, March 18, 2021).

² Dorothy Day, *The Catholic Worker* (January 1967), 1, 2. Referenced Friday, March 19, 2021 online: <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/250.html>

thought about sin, one Elder in a country church simply replied, "I'm against it!" Aristotle advised, "Know thyself."

We could learn something from AA: Where they say, Hi, my name is Scott and I'm an alcoholic. Here, we should say, Hi, my name is Scott and I'm a sinner. Honestly, if Christ came without identifying with our sin and suffering, he wouldn't have anything to offer us. To a world seeking glory through systems of materialism, racial injustice, fiddling with power and prestige, and superficial self-help nonsense, we in the church preach Christ crucified. In a profound way, this is the strange glory God.

A few years ago, I attended a lecture by a popular spirituality writer. He was a kind, gentle man with a warm, generous philosophy, very likable and friendly, though somewhat akin to Mr. Rogers. A few days later, I was talking with a woman who had been at the event, and I asked her, "How did you like it?"

"Fine," she said, "As far as it goes." "What do you mean, 'as far as it goes?'" "He was fine, for those who don't need more. I think I need more." I asked her to explain, and she said, "Well, his spirituality seems fine for folks who are relatively well fixed. But it's no match for the really difficult aspects of life, I think." Although she hesitated, she could sense my desire to hear more.

"You see," she continued, "I was raped when I was a teenager, by a family friend. So personally, I'm glad we are in Lent, where we in the church talk about the cross, and innocent suffering, injustice, evil, blood. I used to hate my life, but I learned to let Christ take that hatred and anger, so that I might take his love... Makes you grateful to be a Christian, don't you think?"

The woman gave a profound insight into Christian faith. God suffered for us on the cross, yes, but God also suffers with us now.

It was on the cross that God was able to provide the means for us to realize David's prayer: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin... Restore to me the joy of your salvation..."

Friends, has the glory of this world waned rather thin for you? When the weight of sin and suffering seem to overcome us, I am grateful that the old, out of fashion church who still gets so many things wrong, is still able to proclaim the cross... The only God I can believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as "God on the cross."

That is the strange glory of God, and the glorious truth into which God calls us to believe and live. Christ draws us to himself, and calls us to follow him, even through great suffering. For there alone is found the strange and glorious path to new life.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.