

Glory
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Fifth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

John 12:22-33

Our lesson for today comes to us from the gospel of John. Today's narrative begins right after John's version of Palm Sunday—Jesus' splashy public entry into Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks (i.e. non Jews). They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man (the human one) to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (or we might say, those who resist the death-dealing ways of this world will find their way to life abundant, or as one translation puts it: "unending, real life") Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:20-33).

Fifty years ago this very day, thousands of civil rights marchers were on the road, following Martin Luther King Jr. on the long trek from Selma to Montgomery, AL. At journey's end, King would describe it as "a highway up from darkness." That speech ended with this refrain: "How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, because: mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Glory.

And course, that journey began all the way back on March 7, in the first attempt to walk out of Selma, when some 600 peaceful protestors were viciously attacked and beaten by authorities. Leading that crowd was a 22-year old John Lewis, whose body bore the first blows on that very Bloody Sunday. Lewis was beaten nearly to death as he knelt in prayer -- that's what the protestors were doing just before the order to attack was issued on the Edmund Pettus bridge.

Explaining this in a recent interview, Lewis said that the movement inspired "love at its best. Its one of the highest forms of love, that you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I'm gonna still love you." Glory.

It's a word we find often in scripture. You know: "the heaven's are telling the glory of God." But in John it becomes a particular and provocative refrain, always pointing back

to Jesus. John 1: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." Just a little later, Jesus "reveals his glory" when he rescues a wedding celebration by turning water into wine. And at the end of John's gospel, on the way to the cross, Jesus prays, "The glory that you have given me I have given (my people) so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that all may become completely one." For John, glory points directly to embodied acts of healing, generosity, compassion, connection, and as that wedding story insists we remember, joy.

Glory is all about the human one and human oneness. It is precisely in his humanity, in Jesus' unqualified embrace of the whole package--joy and suffering, darkness and light, life and death that he *becomes*: the Word becomes flesh, Jesus becomes human, becomes divine. And that is what following Jesus is really about. As one of the earliest Christian commentators declared all the way back in the second century, "the glory of God is the human being fully alive."

All of life is a gift. So *fully alive*, means, at least, fully received, fully embodied "unending real life." And that is also a practice, a life-long journey into and out of darkness, toward compassion. Dying and rising, again and again. And one, nonnegotiable step, the one so many of us want to skate right past, is the one where *we* become the beloved. This, writes Henri Nouwen, is the deepest, core truth of our existence. "We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends, loved or wounded us. That is the truth of our lives... That is the truth spoken by the voice that says, 'You are my Beloved.'" Glory.

Those people on that bridge didn't just show up, kneel down, and offer up their lives. They were not superheroes. They were ordinary people with a vision, one that they cultivated over many years. They trained, and studied, and practiced, and prayed. *For years*. Becoming the beloved, in a world that insisted not only are you not worthy, you are not even quite human. Resistance to that voice, is individual and its communal. The practice, study, prayer and hanging in there together through all the confusion and disagreements and disappointments was all part of building the "beloved community," as Lewis still so lovingly describes that process today.

And the wonder of it all is that when very real, frightened, conflicted, imperfect human beings gather and practice claiming their belovedness together, it helps transform not just them, but the whole world around them. This is precisely the pattern that Nouwen describes in his book *Life of the Beloved*: human lives taken, blessed, broken open and shared for the healing of the world. You know, "in the way and in the spirit of Jesus."

Just listen to the first few guidelines that civil rights protesters were asked to affirm before marching:

1. As you prepare to march, meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus
2. Remember the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation - not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love; for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God that all men and women might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes that all might be free.

We can secularize this story all we want, but it was grounded in the practice of following Jesus. And that, it turns out, is a whole lot more demanding, and powerful, than mere worship. Because following implies that we are being asked not just to *go see Jesus*, but to practice seeing Christ in all people, every day. Each and every one, God's beloved, including our enemies, including every "other" in our lives, whoever that may be for us today. And to do that, to look in the eyes of the other and see the Beloved, requires us to practice looking into the eyes we meet in the mirror, and seeking the Beloved there. Otherwise, it all becomes a transaction. Seeking to do love to earn love, when it really works the other way around. When we recognize that we are love, we can't help but give it away.

The voice in John calls out "glory", exactly like the voice in Mark calls out Beloved. And that same voice is calling us—inviting us to receive the gift of life, so fully and freely and fiercely, that we begin to let go of fear, darkness, death, wounds, old stories, anything that is keeping us from love. We see this pattern of "becoming the beloved" in Martin Luther King Jr., in John Lewis **and** in all those countless unnamed heroes who followed Love on that highway out of darkness. We see this same pattern in all the wonderful spiritual companions that we've been walking with in our seminars this year. And we've seen it first hand, the power of claiming and living one's belovedness, in all the amazing gay and lesbian people who have hung in there with us all these years in the Presbyterian church as we have struggled together to build our own beloved community. And today, after almost 20 years on our own highway out of darkness, to full and unqualified equality – in leadership and in love in the Presbyterian Church, USA– I can only say: glory.

And any time you forget, or need a jolt of hope, a shot of glory, get online and look at that recent photo of Congressman John Lewis weeping in the arms of a black President Obama as they stand together on the Edmund Pettus bridge (still named I must to add for a grand dragon of the Alabama KKK. We are not done, not by a long shot.)

Still, that bridge, "once a landmark of a divided nation is now a symbol for change " these are the words of musician Common as he accepted the Oscar for best original song in the fabulous movie Selma. He went on, "The spirit of this bridge transcends race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and social status... this bridge was built on hope. Welded with compassion. And elevated by love for all human beings."

And while you're at it, go watch the performance of that song at the Oscar celebration. I've never seen anything like it. Created to frame the Selma story, the song begins and ends with just one word; those musicians say they heard it from the very start. Glory. It is a cry of hope, a refrain of resistance to the forces of death, it's a prayer, a song of praise, it is the call of the Beloved and it goes like this:

"One day when the glory comes it will be ours... glory glory glory"

May it be so.