

2021 Convention sermon
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Glory, power, riches, honor, fame.

When asking folks what they want in life many will respond with some sort of variation on those themes. Not that everyone will, and depending on age and experience, it can be quite different, but for many, glory, power, riches, honor and fame are at the core of what we want.

This is true both of individuals and of groups, whether small groups such as clubs or larger groups like nations. Be powerful, have power and wealth, be famous, these are the ways to make our mark on the world.

Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you...give us glory.

We have been hearing variations on the theme of glory, power, riches and fame in our gospel passages for a number of weeks now. We heard Peter foolishly try to explain to Jesus what it means to be the messiah, getting it quite wrong. We heard the disciples argue about which one of them was the greatest, I am not sure what criteria they were using to decide that! The story continued with the disciples trying to define who was in and who was out, who gets to be part of the Body of Christ and

who does not, and Jesus told them that was not their job. Jesus taught that following him is a call to commit with our entire being, not holding anything back, and now, as they are literally walking to Jerusalem and Jesus is teaching he will be condemned to death and killed, James and John come up and say “we want glory.”

One of the things I so appreciate about the Gospel of Mark is that he tells the story at times with brutal honesty about the disciples’ actions. We see the disciples misunderstanding, getting it wrong, being jealous, being fearful, being foolish. They just don’t get what Jesus is trying to teach them.

Or maybe they do get it. Maybe they just don’t want to believe that he is telling the truth. Perhaps they are worried that he really means what he says, that bit about power coming through service and welcoming the outcast and stranger and loving your neighbor and even your enemy and forgiving 70 times 7. Maybe they do get it, at least intellectually, but just can’t imagine living it.

The rich young man who went away last week after Jesus offered him the call to follow, I suspect he got what Jesus was saying, but he could not bring himself to commit.

Sometimes I am the same. I either misunderstand, or I completely get it but don't want to. Certainly the message of Jesus doesn't sound like the words all around us every day. The message of this world is that the rich are blessed, the powerful are those with the most weapons, the prisoners deserve what they got, the weak just need to work harder.

“But it is not so among you.”

Oh as followers of Jesus we do get power and might and riches and glory, but it is the power of service, the might of love, the riches of sacrifice, the glory of the cross.

Sometimes that doesn't quite sound like enough. Sometimes that sounds like lack and not fullness. And yet the promise of Jesus is that not only is this enough, this is overflowing abundance.

Perhaps the past couple of years have not felt like overflowing abundance to you, Perhaps you are like many right now, tired, frustrated, wondering when life can get back to normal, and worried that it never will. Job certainly did not feel overflowing abundance. Job experienced a world overshadowed by pain and suffering. Job cries out to God asking why, why is this happening, how can God allow all this pain and suffering and torment? And God comes and speaks instead of the beauty and glory and joy. God speaks of morning stars singing and heavenly beings shouting for joy.

Perhaps God sounded a bit dismissive to Job, but I wonder if God was inviting Job to take a bigger view. I wonder if God invites all of us, those who are tired and frustrated and weary to take a bigger view.

One of the things I have heard as I have returned to visitation and as I speak with clergy and lay leadership is that this time of covid has taught us valuable lessons. What seemed horrible, and is horrible, has also, when seen from the bigger view, offered us a gift. Many have talked about learning what really matters, many have said that covid helped them get unstuck. We have been reminded about the importance of caring for one another. We have learned how to be the Church in new and creative ways. We have all been reminded that the truly essential workers are often those who have been those overlooked and ignored.

The power of service, the might of love, the riches of sacrifice, the glory of the cross. God's overflowing abundance.

Yesterday in my convention address I talked about our diocesan priorities, priorities that focus on building up our congregations, strengthening, growing, planting new congregations. It could be very easy to see those priorities in light of past times, times when the churches all around were full, times when it was a cultural norm to be a Christian, times when nothing interfered with Sunday morning worship. Times when the Church had worldly power, worldly wealth, worldly glory.

Those times are gone, and we might want to sit with Job and complain, we might want to speak with James and John and ask Jesus to do whatever we want him to. Instead, we are called to learn the language of morning stars singing and heavenly beings shouting for joy. We are called to learn the lessons of this past year, and hear again the words of Jesus, that his way, the way of love, looks nothing at all like the way of Empire. As we work to continually develop strong communities of faith, as we strengthen, grow and plant new congregations, we cannot have images from earlier days as our goal. We are called to be a church that looks like Jesus, a church which acts like Jesus. Not interested in any power but the power of service. Not seeking any glory but the glory of the Cross.

James and John did not know what they were asking for, and yet they found the glory of Jesus at the end. We might not always know what we are asking for, yet if we stick together, and follow Jesus along his way of love, we too will find all that we need, we too will find his glory. Amen