

“Glory Days”

Matthew 21:1-11

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Now you know I don't always like to pick on the Toronto Maple Leafs. After all, as a Christian, I believe that sympathy and compassion need to be given especially towards the downtrodden. Certainly, amongst professional sports franchises, the Leafs are not the only organization that has experienced a long drought since winning a championship. But you know, this spring will mark 49 years since the Leafs have won the Stanley Cup. This means that next season will be the 50th anniversary of the Leafs last winning the Cup. I'm not sure that is really something worth celebrating...but when you haven't won a championship in so long...I suppose you need to have something to celebrate. I expect that the Maple Leafs will mark the occasion in some fashion. Maybe inviting former players from the last cup winning team to make special appearances. I'm sure they will flash old footage on the scoreboard so everyone can remember a time when the Leafs won the cup. It's been so long, I'm sure that many people out there are starting to wonder if the Leafs winning the Stanley cup is some sort of myth. Did it actually happen? Of course it did...but those glory days were a long time ago.

I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but sports teams, when they haven't met any recent success, well, they can spend a lot of time turning back the clock and celebrating the glory days of the past. But this is what we humans can do when we feel as if there is nothing to celebrate in the present...or if there is nothing to look forward to. There is a tendency to remember and even live off of past glory-think of better days gone by.

Who among us hasn't at one time or another in our lives, found ourselves in the midst of a slump or feeling the effects of decline, thinking back to happier, perhaps more youthful or vibrant days? Maybe it was when you won the class spelling bee. Were a part of a championship team in high school. Maybe it was a time when you were honoured or given some special recognition on the job. Or maybe you are at a stage in your life when the glory days you think of were when you were able to put your shoes on without your back hurting. Or

climb a set of stairs without finding yourself out of breath. Or sleeping through the night without getting up to go to the bathroom. Maybe those were the glory days you remember.

You know there are many in this world who live with a hunger to return to something...and often it is a return to past glories.

When those cheering crowds welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with that big palm parade all those years ago...they were hungering for a return to glory...

Jesus enters Jerusalem during the time of Passover. Passover is the Jewish festival that remembered the deliverance of the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. In a sense it was a celebration that remembered some of the past glory of the people of Israel. Passover remembers how with God's help, their ancestors had escaped their captivity in Egypt, survived for many years in the wilderness and then eventually made it into the promised land as a people.

Historians believe that when the Passover festival was celebrated at that time, the city of Jerusalem which would have normally held around 80000 people could have swelled to well over a million. It's really difficult to imagine just how crowded the streets would have been...how heightened the atmosphere was. Goodness knows how the Romans must of felt, trying to keep the peace and order in the city. Things would have been quite intense.

Jesus entering to a parade of palms would have intensified the situation even more. Jesus was being received as a coming monarch, a new king, a promised leader for the Jews. The last thing the Romans needed was someone undermining the authority of Caesar. This reality certainly had a great deal to do with why Jesus was eventually arrested and put to death the way he was. The Jews that welcomed Jesus with their shouts of Hosanna that day were looking for a Messiah...a Saviour. They wanted someone who would return them and their nation to its former glory. Almost a hundred years had passed since the Jewish people and Israel had existed independently. Since that time, they had existed under Roman occupation. Many onlookers would have been thinking back to the glory days of Israel. Remembering some of the past prophets and kings and times when the nation of Israel was free and independent and great. The shouts of Hosanna, which literally mean "God save us"...were loaded with a desired a return to glory.

There is a tradition of this kind of shouting that goes on in the body of Scripture throughout the Old Testament. The scriptures attest to many instances in the history of God's people when they harkened back to imagined better times and glory days, with the hope that they could return to those days. Return to their former glory. It's a pattern of human behavior that's been around a long time.

Being made great again...a return to glory. We still hear those chants in our world don't we. Isn't that Donald Trump's campaign slogan? "Let's make America great again?" It's a promise to return to former glory. But the promise is nothing new. It's a promise given to and the promise believed by ones who see their best days as being behind them. All they believe they can do is look back in hopes of a restoration of what was. Politicians do it and have done it for ages, appeal to the masses for a return to glory, because there is something within human nature that craves turning back the clock and hearkening to a better time.

We do it as individuals too. As a society, we can spend billions of dollars annually trying to find the way to turn the clock back in our lives. It's not just a matter of trying to look younger, it really is about attempting to recapture some of our former glory. And I'm not judging it as good or bad...it's just a reality in which we can find ourselves. There is a great deal of pressure in this world for us to find ways and even believe that we can return to our former glory.

But the promise of restoration, of returning to a former glory is an empty promise because we cannot turn the clock back to the way things used to be. The promise of that kind of restoration lacks vision because it lacks hope for the future. It is more interested in valuing what was to the point that we can depreciate and even ignore what we have. We cheapen the value of our present moment. You see, it's easy to fall into despair when we start to believe that life's value can only be found in the way things used to be. One author put it this way, he said, "You can be sad recalling sad times, but if you really want to be sad, recall happy times."

We do a disservice to ourselves and to others, especially I believe our children and to future generations. It can lead to a great deal of sadness and lament. If we can only look back to find our glory and the glory of life, we resign ourselves to a degree of hopelessness...people come to fear even dread the future. To live life out of past glory is to live with a limited sense

of glory...we limit life's potential. It's not that we shouldn't recall fond memories and think of better times...that's not what I'm saying here. After all, one of the gifts of living are memories and reminders of past joys and good times. But life is more than this. There is and should be the promise of joy to be discovered in the present and the future...an undiscovered joy that is more than just wanting what we once had.

This is one of the differences faith should make in our lives. Our faith calls us to believe in Glory days that are at hand, that there is an unimagined glory unfolding before our eyes. A glory to be discovered in the present moment and the promise of future glory. I know this can be hard to believe...especially if you're a Leafs fan...but it's true...there is a glory as we live, and a greatness and a beauty in this life that is unfolding before our eyes. In his book *Future Grace*, Ron Piper puts it this way, "The only life I have left to live is future life. The past is not in my hands to offer or alter. It is gone. Not even God will change the past. All the expectations of God are future expectations. All the possibilities of faith and love are future possibilities. And all the power that touches me with help to live in love is future power. As precious as the bygone blessings of God may be, if He leaves me only with the memory of those, and not with the promise of more, I will be undone. My hope for future goodness and future glory is future grace."

It was hope in this kind of glory that the apostle Paul alludes to in the text that Zander read for us earlier. For Paul, as he sat in prison, he had every reason to believe that his glory days were long gone...that he had no present or future. Why even bother writing this letter to the Philippians? Yet his faith and his belief in Christ told him otherwise. There was still hope for the Philippians, hope for himself, hope for us. Hope because the glory we seek in life, when we look to the cross of Christ, is never something that is there behind us...even though it happened so long ago. For the glory that Christ reveals, is an everlasting one...a living one...it is the work of the eternal Spirit that seeks to glorify every moment of our lives in order that it might be transformed into something more beautiful than the limited vision of glory we humans can so often settle with. Christ empties himself on the cross of all past glory, in order that the Spirit might glorify him anew.

You know, a different understanding of glory is what Holy Week is about. Yes, it begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and harkens back to the glory days of old for God's people, but it doesn't take long for things to change. The journey of the Son of God is different and it leads to places where we might not expect to find glory, places where we normally wouldn't look for glory. Places like the upper room where Jesus washed the feet of and shared a meal with his disciples. Places like the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed with his disciples and made the decision to go to the cross. Places like the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem where Jesus was tried before the Roman governor Pilate, where he was questioned and tortured. Places like Golgotha, where he was crucified. Places like the tomb where his body was placed. Holy week is a time, filled with unlikely, sometimes dark places that give way to glory. And we as Christians know this because we live in the light of Christ's resurrection...a resurrection that comes with that promise of future grace.

I witnessed this kind of unfolding glory and future grace years ago spending time with a family in a congregation I once served at a time and in a place where many may not expect to find it. The family had a loved one in hospital who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. For weeks, when I would make occasional visits to the hospital and check-in, I remember moments spent with the family members as they told me about what had happened that day or in the previous day in the time they had together. Of the care that was provided by doctors and nurses, of stories that were shared, friends who had visited or called and of the love that was experienced even in those days near the end of a person's life. There was a different kind of life experienced during those times...unexpected joys. Yes there were challenges and sadness. But those were glory days because in them the fragile gift of life and the love they shared and experienced in each moment was lifted up and not forsaken.

Author Anne Lamott describes it is a glory that comes "as that stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come." It's not a limited sense of glory, that looks to the past and can only imagine the better days behind us. It is a faith-filled hope that appreciates and engages in the glory made possible in each moment that builds the future. We are not meant to be ones saying, "save us from our present moment," instead our Hosanna should be a prayer to God that says, "save us by being in our present moment with a vision of

life and the future that is more than just what was.” It is a vision and a faith that brings value and glory to each and every moment. Even when we gather at the table to share the bread and the cup. It’s when God’s breath mingles with our own breath; when the mind of God inspires our own thinking, when God’s spirit enters our lives and this world, revealing goodness, beauty, and truth meant to give glory for all and forever with the promise of future grace.

Amen.