

Life never seems to come out exactly how you expect, huh? I mean, really. Think back to those daydreams you had in your early teens, if you can remember them. What did you picture for your adult life? Maybe it was grandiose plans of being a famous actor or rockstar. Maybe you thought you'd be an athlete or a business tycoon. Either way, rich and famous. Or maybe you set your sights a little lower and just expected a successful career, enough to make you money so that you and your future spouse and children wouldn't really want for anything and of course you'd be perfectly in love and so life would be one unending ride of harmony and contentment.

Whatever your dream was, I feel pretty safe in suggesting it probably hasn't worked out as easily as you thought it might. It hasn't been all sunshine and roses. There has been difficulty. There has been darkness. And it probably hasn't been as grand or glorious as you might've thought you deserved. Hopefully, as your life went on, you also learned that this is okay. In fact, God would like to tell us today that this is more than okay, this is exactly how it needs to be, and that is a very good thing.

Look at Jesus in our reading for today. It was nearly the Passover. The last Passover he would see on earth. Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen at this Passover observance. In fact, he knew that it was because of him that the Passover had been instituted in the first place all those hundreds of years ago. The Passover wasn't a ceremony that God came up with and later decided that Jesus should parallel. No, God knew exactly what Jesus would do and so he deliberately created the Passover to parallel Jesus.

The Passover called for the sacrifice of a young lamb, one without any blemish, whose blood would cover the house. The angel of death would see the blood, see the occupants *through* the blood of the sacrifice, and spare those inside as a result. In fact, God went so far as to establish the celebration of the Passover at a specific date and time each year so that Jesus himself would give up his spirit from the cross at exactly the moment the lambs were to be killed throughout the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus knew this was coming. In fact, more than a lamb led to the slaughter, he would be humiliated. Tortured. Mocked. Brutalized. And executed in one of the more horrific manners that mankind has managed to come up with. We may have had some unexpected darkness in our own lives, some low points where we have been embarrassed or hurt, certainly not treated or respected the way our pride thinks we ought to be. But none of that could compare to what Jesus was anticipating here. I don't think that any of us can really understand the physical and mental anguish, we just don't have a frame of reference in our lives.

And none of that even holds a candle to the worst that Jesus knew was coming. He knew that beyond the earthly torment, he was going to bear the wrath of God himself. The punishment poured out for all the crimes committed since the foundation of the world up to the end of it. Everything from the smallest selfish thought to the cruelest atrocity would be paid for by him as he hung there. God himself, who ought to be on a shining throne, surrounded by his angels with the whole world singing his praises. God was about to stoop lower than any of us ever have. So low would sink, so dark was the hour that the sun itself would stop shining during this time.

But about this coming time, Jesus says plainly, **"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."** (v23). Again and again God astounds us by turning the expected on its head. We know what's coming, we know what we'd think about it. But God says he is about to be glorified! What about the miracle of his birth? What about the chorus of angels that announced him? What about the healings and the walking on water and feeding the five thousand and raising the dead? What about the mount of transfiguration? *Now* is the hour for glory?

But God does not reckon glory like we do. And God can see past the earthly and the mundane in ways we can't. In this instance, we have the benefit of knowing what would happen and can see what Jesus is saying here in light of what was coming. **"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."** (v24). Looking back through history, we know what he means. He was going to die. It would be humiliating. It would be horrible. But it would accomplish more than we could imagine. This one death would mean eternal life for any who would have it. By this humiliating act of selfless love, God would forgive the crimes of all by punishing a substitute. He further elaborates, **"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."** (v31,32).

The prince of this world wants us dead. The devil hates God and so he wants to see everything God creates destroyed. He wants to see you dead with him. He wants you to reject God like he did so you will join him in eternal torment. The victory will bring him no relief or satisfaction, but such is his irrational hatred that he pursues this goal relentlessly. But at the cross he was defeated. For a time in Eden it seemed like he triumphed, that he had managed to

ruin what God had carefully built. But at the cross God set the balance straight. He provided for the salvation of mankind and foiled the purposes of the devil. The prince of this world is driven out. And Jesus, by being lifted up from the earth on the cross, calls to all people everywhere, calling them to look at him and live. Calling them to put their trust in him for eternal life.

Jesus knew the darkness he would have to endure to make this happen. He even said that his heart was troubled. We've seen his anguish in Gethsemane as he waited for what he knew was coming. And yet, he says here that his prayer is not "Father, save me from this hour," but rather, "**Father, glorify your name!**" (v28). More important to him than his personal wishes or his personal comfort was the will of his Father in heaven. More important than his personal glory was the glory that would be shown to his Father by putting aside his own pride and doing what the Father asked of him. By doing what his Father asked, he was sending a clear signal that whatever the Father wanted was what was most important to him, because the Father himself was the most important to him.

And so the glory is indeed there. It's hidden from the world but to us it is plainly visible. The glory is there in the darkness, in the sacrifice because Jesus put everything else above him. He put the will of his Father above all and he put our best interest before his own. Nowhere is there a better expression of "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself." That is where the glory shows. That Jesus did this for the Father and for you, knowing full well what it would cost him. In God's order the leader is at the bottom, holding up and helping all those under his care. This is where the greatest glory lies, even when obscured by the darkness of the world.

And now Jesus has set us an example, that we should do likewise. The example is both to change our perspective and our actions. The great act of love that Jesus has accomplished for you ripples out into every area of our own lives. You have seen your savior and you will live because of that. Your life is not the same as when you entered this world. You know you have the forgiveness you need. You know that eternity is waiting for you and that this life is no longer entirely relevant. Instead, we are free now to emulate Christ with the rest of our lives here as he says, "**The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also will be.**" (v25,26).

This service that we render to God happens in the same way that Jesus' service did. It works in the darkness. It works in the face of the darkness, in *spite* of the darkness. We do not *earn* ourselves anything through it, because everything we have and everything we need is already given to us by our God before we even begin. To act for a reward defeats the purpose before we start. Instead, as a response to what Jesus did for us, we now act for him, we now act like him. And the glory shines.

Every time we choose God the glory shines. Every time we are faced with a choice between what we think we want and what God wants and we choose God, the glory shines. Every act that declares, "God is more important to me!" every choice that gives of ourselves to choose God or to care for another shines that glory. Every thought, every word, every action taken because we love our God and what he wants more than we love ourselves or the world, they all shine that glory of God in the darkness. Each one makes a statement to the rest of the world, that my God is worth this. And Jesus promises, "**My Father will honor the one who serves me.**" (v26).

Astonishing, isn't it? That God would applaud and honor our feeble actions for him. Actions that he himself has to inspire in us through the Holy Spirit. Actions that he must give us the power to perform. Actions that even then he must wash clean in the blood of Jesus to find them good and pleasing to him. And yet at the end of it he gives us honor for our service. And this service comes in a thousand tiny ways every day.

It really is the small choices, the chance thoughts, the soft words and the tiny actions that all add up. Don't look for your glory in the big and the splashy and the showy. That's just another way of loving this world. Remember again Jesus' example. What he did for us, by all outward appearances looked like the worst kind of failure and defeat. The appearances don't matter. The size of the gesture doesn't matter. What matters is the heart full of love for God that caused it. The husband who sets aside his wants for his spouse's care because God asked him to love his wife as Christ loved the church. The worker who carries out her duties faithfully because God told her to be worth the wages she earns. The child who listens to his parent's instructions because God told him that his parents are God's representatives. The faithful believer who sets aside a precious hour of free time to spend with his God each week or more.

Every small act that chooses God first shines that glory in the darkness of this world and our lives. Every act that declares to the world what your God is worth to you shines that glory. And each one of those acts is empowered and inspired by the greatest act God ever gave us, when he gave himself for us on the cross. Remember his glory there and carry that glory into your lives. Amen.