

Glory & Death

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[0 : 00] Everybody wanted war to be over in the 70s, everybody wants war to be over now, but the fact of the matter is it rages on. And so there's that kind of hope where it's our wishful thinking of a kind of alternate reality, and it's not really rooted in the world in which you and I live, but then there's big H hope.

And big H hope is when there's actually something real and substantial that gives us reason to expect something wonderful in the future.

Like you think of World War II when the Dutch people, Greg, how did the Dutch people treat you as a Canadian Army guy? Like 50 years later, like in the big celebration.

Right. Dutch people love Canadians, as I understand it, because at some point during World War II, the Dutch people realized that the Canadian forces were defeating the Nazi Army.

And at that point, the Dutch people understood hope, hope with a big H, right? They knew that they had a future that wasn't just wishful thinking, but they had a future of liberty without having to live under German occupation.

[1 : 16] That's hope with a big H. And what I want to do is look at how Christmas gives us not just little H hope, we get a lot of that in all the mall music that we listen to, but big H hope.

And I want to do it by looking at the Transfiguration. Okay, so look at the last reading that we read. I know this isn't a Christmas reading, but we're going to look at it anyway.

And then kind of back into the Christmas story. Jesus is, you know, we've been following along in Luke. Jesus is, this is long after he was born.

He's probably 31 or 32 at this point. And he's a celebrity and he's mobbed by people everywhere he goes. And so he would slip away to pray up to the mountains, like we often do, right?

Retreats and that kind of thing. And this time he took a few of his disciples with him. He took Peter and he took John and he took James. And apparently Jesus, when he prayed, it had kind of an effect.

[2 : 17] What's it called when you, something is, is it soporific? When it makes you want to go to sleep? Yeah, apparently Jesus' prayers were soporific. Because every time Jesus spends a lot of time praying, the disciples get sleepy, it seems like.

And so in this passage, you see them, Jesus prays, they go to sleep. And then when they wake up, they see something extraordinary. They look at Jesus and his face starts to glow.

And his clothes begin to glow. And they become white and bright like lightning. And then as they're kind of coming to, they're looking at Jesus and he's all radiant and bright.

And then they see two other guys. They see Moses and they see Elijah. And apparently it's when they saw Moses and Elijah, Peter gets really excited about this.

And part of the reason he gets excited has to do with what his nation, the nation of Israel, was struggling with at the time. Israel had had several hundred years of near despair.

[3 : 27] Israel was kind of teetering on the edge of despair. Their hope was hanging like a thread. Because Israel had this great past. But they had just a horrible present reality.

And when you look at Israel's past, one of the best things that they had going for them. They were never a particularly powerful nation. They were never politically mighty, for very long at least.

But when you looked at their past, they had great prophets. The thing that marked them out as unique was the fact that they were a people who had received God's word.

That God had spoken to them through prophets. Again and again, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Moses and Elijah and all these other guys. But the problem when you get to the first century is that the prophets have died out.

And God's not speaking anymore. And to some extent, it was the silence of God over Israel that was at the root of their despair.

[4 : 35] And I think that's something we can resonate with. Most of us here will believe in God. And even unreligious people kind of have this sneaking suspicion that God exists and that he created the world.

There's a few atheists, but you don't run across them as often as you might think. But the minute you begin to think that, okay, there's a God who created everything. Am I right that there's a problem?

Is there a problem? It comes up for me, at least. And the problem is, if there's a God who created everything and apparently has this great purpose for everything, why is he so quiet? Why doesn't he make himself clearer?

And it's one of the questions that was hanging over Israel at the time. And so when the disciples looked up and they saw Moses and they saw Elijah, it was really good news.

Because in their minds, they're thinking, fantastic, the silence of God has ended. And God's going to start speaking through his prophets. And apparently Peter was thinking that Jesus was the next installment in the prophet line.

[5 : 47] And then you see, look back at the reading. Then there's a cloud that comes around them. And a voice. And it's the voice of God. And it was the scariest voice the disciples had ever heard.

The cloud comes around them. Moses and Elijah just kind of slip off into the background. And God says in verse 35, this is my son.

Pointing to Jesus. This is my son. This is my chosen one. Listen to him. Peter had thought, Peter it seems, had begun to think that Jesus was a prophet like Moses and Elijah.

And he was kind of on equal par with them. But God speaks from heaven and he says, no, no, Peter, it's way better than that. Way better than that. Way more hope than that.

Jesus is way more than Moses and Elijah. He's more than a prophet. He's more than a religious teacher. He is my son and that means he is my permanent spokesman. Now, think back.

[6 : 53] Now, let's think about Christmas here. And part of why Christmas is full of real hope. The reason, one of the reasons that Christmas is full of real hope is that when Jesus was born, it means that the silence of God has ended forever.

It means, you know, as humans, we're in this weird predicament, aren't we? We observe our world, but everywhere we look, you can interpret our world in different directions.

You can look at our world and at times it looks like a really hospitable place and a really good place to live and we might think that God is really great and wonderful and we might have hope.

But you can look at other places in the world and other aspects of the world and it looks like the world is a horrible place to live and it looks like God is horribly vindictive. Even think about the snow. How many people love the snow? How many people despise it? Oh. I'm sorry, Aaron. But, I mean, isn't it true?

[8 : 04] You can look at the snow and if you're a guy like me, I look at it and go, Oh my goodness, it's so beautiful and so glorious. God must be good and he must love me. Because he gives me stuff to ski on.

And things out of which to make snowballs. But, I mean, for a lot of people, you know, if you're homeless or if you're elderly or if you're Aaron, you look at the snow and it's horrible.

You know, and it becomes for people good reason to think that the world is not a very hopeful place and the world is a terrible place and that God is vindictive and all of those sorts of things.

And our human observations of the world will always leave us with this kind of weird ambiguity. But the only way that we can break through that and to really have a clear sense of whether or not we have real, true, good reason to hope in this world is if God breaks in.

And if God comes and speaks to us and gives us his perspective. And if God comes, if God, the one who made everything, the designer of the world, if he speaks to us, then we can know whether or not there is good reason to hope.

[9 : 20] And that's exactly what he's done in Jesus. Because when we look to Jesus, we find God speaking to us in a way that we can understand, where we can see the purpose of the world and we can see the destiny of the world.

You know that's part of the reason we tell others as Christians? Part of the reason evangelism is a viable and worthwhile thing is because God has spoken so clearly and uniquely through Jesus.

Lots of people, you know, if all we have are our own observations of the world, then all of our perspectives is equally valid and we should never try to impose our view on anybody else. But if God has spoken uniquely in Jesus, then he's given us so much hope.

And we can see and listen to God with such clarity that it makes sense for us to go out and share that hope with the people around us. And that's why we do evangelism.

So Christmas gives us hope because it's God speaking to us in a way that we can understand. But Christmas also gives us hope because Jesus comes as our liberator. Look back at the reading, verse 35.

[10:37] You notice Jesus says three things, right? Or God says three things. God says, this is my son. God says, listen to him. But right in the middle, do you see that?

He goes, this is my chosen one. And the question is, chosen for what? Flip over to the Isaiah reading. When God says, this is my son, this is my chosen one, he's quoting Isaiah.

He's quoting Isaiah chapter 42. And look at the first verse. Behold my servant whom I uphold. And then what's the next word? My chosen one, or my chosen.

In whom my soul delights. And then skip down to verse 6. So what God is saying, when God is saying, Jesus is my chosen one, he's saying Jesus is the one that Isaiah was talking about.

Look over to Isaiah, verse 6. And this is God giving Jesus kind of his job description. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, and to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, and from prison those who sit in darkness.

[11:48] When God says, you are my chosen one, what he's saying is, you are my chosen one to set humanity free from its prisons.

Now most of us are aware of that, but I want to speak to those of us here for whom Christmas is a really depressing time. Because this is where Christmas becomes hopeful for you.

A lot of us here probably struggle with Christmas. A lot of people struggle with depression through Christmas. And part of it is because at Christmas you have this real high expectation for joy.

Everybody's so happy and everything. But we also end up getting a really high and acute sense of our own pain during the same time of year.

And some of it has to do with lots of different things. Sometimes we think about the people who have died, who are not with us now. Sometimes we think about the relationships in our lives that aren't the way we want them to be, our family life, our friend life, whatever.

[12:56] Sometimes we think of the areas in which we feel really guilty. Could be all sorts of things. But the irony at Christmas is that at the same time that so many of us are in touch with joy, a lot of us are in touch most acutely with our own kind of spiritual, emotional, human prisons.

The prison of our guilt, the prison of suffering, the prison of death and mortality when we see the people who are no longer with us and those sorts of things.

And the great thing about Christmas is that at Christmas, Jesus came into the world to set us free from all of those prisons. to Christmas, it was God coming in and becoming one of us.

So when Jesus took upon himself human nature, he took upon himself our own mortality, our own suffering, our own guilt, not that Jesus was guilty of anything, but he took upon himself the penalty of our guilt.

And then he went through and he experienced all the worst of it. You know, when he died upon the cross, he suffered death, he suffered the worst of human suffering, he experienced the worst of human suffering, and he experienced human guilt when the sin of the world was placed upon him.

[14:22] And when he rose again, he triumphed over all three of those, over guilt, over death, over suffering. And that means that he gives us certain hope, that he will accomplish that, he will triumph over that in our lives as well, for those of us who receive him.

And that's why, even though so often Christmas is a time of great pain and difficulty, it is also a time in which we can know hope. Because Jesus has gone through our suffering before us, and he has conquered it.

And because he conquered it, because he really was born, because he really did suffer, because he really did die, because he really did rise again, the hope that he gives us isn't just little H hope, it's big H hope, because it's based in the real world.

So that we can be certain, as certain as the fact that he was a historical figure, so certain is our hope that we will know a day in which suffering will be no more, and death will be no more, and guilt will be no more.

And so our job this Christmas is to enter into the joy of Christmas by entering into the hope of Christmas. That's where real joy comes from, you know, big J joy, as opposed to little J joy. [15 : 44] Big J, real joy, comes when we know that real hope that Jesus gives us. And so for those of us here, take time this week, and just ponder, in the reading about Jesus' birth with the angels, it says that Mary pondered and treasured these things in her heart.

That's what we're to do, treasure these things, ponder these things, and think about what Jesus has accomplished for you, and the beauty and glory of God, embracing human existence, and transforming it, and giving us hope.

And it's as we ponder those things that we'll know that joy. Let's pray together.