

“His Descent leads to our Ascent”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

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John 12:20-33 *“the hour has come for the Son to be glorified”*

We live in a culture where **self-promotion is considered normal**. It is NOT just HOLLYWOOD and the recording industry that promote themselves by holding what seems like an endless series of television specials whose **sole purpose** is to shower praise and awards on each other. Check out the list of categories in which awards are given.

Corporations get into the act by showering obscene bonuses and perks on senior executives regardless of company performance. It was recently announced that pharmaceutical giant Pfizer's new CEO was awarded a stock grant of \$350M. When shocked shareholders expressed alarm they were given what has become the standard rationale, “this CEO is indispensable to the company's success.” I liked an analyst's response; “I guess there are not many people out there who can oversee a company losing half its market value in only two years.”

This shameless self-promotion and self-glorification is nothing compared with the world's dictators. Adam Hochschild has itemized certain common characteristics of deposed dictators:

1. A chest full of self-awarded medals (think of Idi Amin of Uganda's chest; and Saddam's outfit)
2. Sunglasses
3. Endorsement by Mother Teresa.

4. Last-minute conversion to Islam when in need of Saudi money.
5. Extrication by the US when things go wrong.
6. No gainful employment in exile.

-- Adam Hochschild, *"Lovely Chaps," Times Literary Supplement, 28 February 2003, 36.*

The world's most interesting reigning dictator? Dictator Saparmurad Niyazov of Turkmenistan.

He renamed the months of the year, April after his mother, the other months after his first and last names and family members. He gave himself the title, “Father of all Turk men.”

The baseball season opens tomorrow and the big story surrounds **Barry Bonds'** assault on the most hallowed record in sports: the home run records held by Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron.

Babe Ruth's life is that of an American legend, a Baltimore orphan who would become not only the game's greatest player, but also the greatest sports figure of **any** era.

Stories about the Babe abound. In 1930, deep in the depression, Ruth got a raise to an unheard of sum of \$100,000. This salary was not surpassed until the early 1960's. When a reporter asked what Ruth thought about his salary being higher than the President's salary, he never hesitated before quipping, **“Well I had a better year than the President.”**

Today third year major leaguers make more than the President. Let us hope few have better years.

The great controversy surrounds Bonds' alleged steroid use. Here is the April 3rd cover of the **NEW YORKER magazine**. (shown on screen) Note Bonds' chemically enhanced #25 looms large in left field.

The real question baseball insiders and serious fans have asked is this: Why would Bonds, who by 1999 was already a certain Hall of Famer, who was widely acknowledged as the game's top player, his statistical record already earning him the accolades as the most complete player ever to take field, why he would risk injury and his reputation to take steroids?

If the authors of the new book are to be believed, Bonds did so after he witnessed the **hero worship** afforded Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa during their pursuit of Roger Maris' single season home run record. It irked Bonds that McGuire, a player of far less talent and achievement, was getting all the glory and accolades that Bonds believed should be showered on him as the game's greatest player. Bonds could also see that McGuire and Sosa had chemically altered their bodies without penalty. Bonds believed he was the greatest and he alone would have all the glory and accolades. It is ironic that although Bonds has dominated the sport like no one has since Ruth, he is reviled and booed in almost every city outside of San Francisco.

Contrasting this aggressive self-promotion is the life of Jesus. Jesus is arguably the most significant figure to have ever lived. He was facing what would be the most important week in his life and the pivotal point of human history . . . he is talking with his disciples . . . He tells them that “**hour has come for the son of man to be glorified.**”

But this is peculiar sort of glory. To be whipped and stripped and hung on a cross. To be humiliated and abused in public and then to die a cruel death. **What a strange way to be glorified?**

Worse yet, Jesus goes on and tells Peter and the disciples that their road to glory is by taking up the same **route of suffering**.

Thomas Schmidt suggested that Christianity's first public relations problem was the Cross. The cross for non-Christians was laughable. Who would want to celebrate someone who suffered a humiliating public execution? In fact, many Christians didn't commonly use the cross as a symbol until several hundred years later. How could anyone connect the Savior of the World with a man who died on a cross? Wouldn't such a leader command powerful armies?

Two Mondays ago I drove to downtown Baltimore, not to visit the Babe Ruth museum, but to attend a local alumni gathering of my seminary. The luncheon was held at the historic First and Franklin Presbyterian; a 200 year old church of majestic architecture. The church has the classic **tall steeple which reminds you of days a century ago** when the big prominent downtown church stood taller and more majestic than any other building in the city.

The actual meeting was held in the house next door. This magnificent high ceilinged house was built in the mid-1830's by the pastor (obviously a man of personal wealth). It passed down through his family for four generations before the church purchased it in the 1920's.

The reason I attended was to meet the seminary's new President, Dr. Ian Torrance of Scotland. Dr. Torrance spoke about the changes he is trying to implement in the stodgy, tradition bound seminary—the nation's oldest and richest institution for training church leaders. Princeton is blessed with the most influential faculty of all the world's seminaries.

But seminary education is changing. Seminary education used to be a “**Top down**” faculty driven enterprise. These ivory towered professors decided what the student needed to learn. Today, increasingly, the focus is student centered learning. Non-faculty decide the skills and information the students need to gain and the faculty is held accountable to seeing that it happens. Change is hard---not surprisingly many faculty are resistant.

I asked how he expected to get these renowned and senior faculty members to change. Dr. Torrance said, I remind them that, “**Everyone is answerable.**” To say we are children of God is to acknowledge that we don't grow unless we are challenged. “The Church and its leaders should always model our conviction that **we never seek our own glory but seek to lift up and glorify Christ.** “

Eugene Peterson likes to remind church leaders that following Jesus **involves the cross.** “We give up our lives—the gospel is clear about this. The first half of the gospel is Jesus showing people how to live. He's healing everybody . . . then right in the middle he shifts. He starts showing people how to die. Now that you've got a life, I 'am going to show you how to die. And as you learn how to die, you start losing all your illusions and you start being capable now of true intimacy and love. It involves a kind of learned passivity, so that the primary mode of relationship is receiving, submitting—instead of getting and doing. We don't do that very well. We're trained to be assertive, to get, to apply or consume or perform.”

I eagerly welcome the arrival of spring. I do this by doing some yard work and taking walks around the neighborhood reconnecting with neighbors who are re-emerging after the winter long hibernation first question I was asked was, “**How is the lawsuit on the Rancher going next door?** “ The inquirer is an active member at the Methodist church who is upset that CCPC is being dragged through the mud. He was also concerned how I am doing.
“**What are you doing about it?**”

I replied that the Bible says we are to do two things when attacked:
First, kill them with kindness. Secondly, to follow the passive example of Jesus towards those that led him to the cross.

I had been reading Paul's letter to the Romans where we find these words in chapter 12.
“*Let your love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good,
love one another with mutual affections, outdo one another in showing honor.
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.*

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Bless those who persecute you and do not curse them.*

Do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

*Beloved, never avenge yourself, but leave room for the wrath of God.
No, if your enemies are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink,*

*for by doing so you will heap burning coals on their heads.
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

In other words, take up the cross and follow Jesus.

I do admit it is sometimes tempting to respond in entirely different ways. This is extortion.

But hasn't history has proved Jesus right?
It was the magnet of the cross that lifted the world up.
His love lasted long after his death.
The empires founded on force have vanished.
The kingdom founded upon a cross, each year extends its sway.
The greatest example of the **Power** of love is the cross.

In giving his life—Jesus is glorified. By following him we too are lifted up.

But the way of the cross is a strange, counter-intuitive, route to glory.

Fred Craddock tells a story about a family out for a Sunday drive. Suddenly the two children in the back begin to beat their father in the back, "Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There's a kitten back there on the side of the road."

The Father says, "so there's a kitten on the side of the road. We are having a nice drive."
"But Daddy," the girls plead, "you must stop and pick it up."
"I don't have time to stop and pick it up," the Father retorts.
"But Daddy, if you don't it will die"

"Well then it will have to die, said the Father, "We don't have room for another animal. We already have a zoo at our house. No more animals."
"But Daddy, are you going to just let it die?", cry the girls.
"Be quiet, we've having a pleasant drive we will be home to see all your other pets soon."

Then the girls play hardball, "We never thought **our Daddy** would be **so mean** and cruel as to let a kitten die!

Finally the Mother intervenes. "Dear, you'll have to stop.
He turns around, returns to the spot. He directs the girls, "You kids stay in the car. I'll see about it."
He goes to pick up the little kitten, who is just skin and bones, sore eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the **kitten bristles, baring tooth and claws.**
Hisses at him!

He picks the kitten up brings it over to the car and says, "don't touch it, it probably has leprosy."

Back home they go. When they get back to the house the children give the kitten several baths. They give it a gallon or so of warm milk, and the make a request, "Dad, can we let it stay in the house just tonight? Tomorrow we will find a place in the garage."
Father relents easily, "sure, take my bedroom - the whole house is already a zoo."
So the girls fix a fine bed for the kitten.

Several weeks pass. Then one day the father walks in, feels something run against his leg, looks down, and there is a cat. He reaches down towards the cat, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bear its claws or hiss; instead it arches its back to receive a caress.

Is this the same cat? It couldn't be. It's not the hurt, frightened, hissing kitten on the side of the road waiting to die. Of course not—and you and I know as well as what makes the difference.

When you think about it—a faith that finds its source of power and glory in the death of its founder on the cross is pretty peculiar.

We look up and see the glory of a God who stoops to us in our need
—the Lord who reigns from the cross.

Strange— isn't it?