
The Power and the Glory

Ephesians 1: 15-23

A Sermon preached in Duke Chapel on November 3, 2013, by the Rev. Dr. Sam Wells

One of the most exotic strands in history is the tradition of alchemy. Tracing back to classical antiquity, with detours through Arab and Islamic wisdom, into the medieval and renaissance eras, and up until around the eighteenth century, arise a cluster of codes, techniques, and mysteries. These secrets promise to turn base metals into gold and create a “philosopher’s stone” that can bring about rejuvenation and usher in immortality.

How quaint, we may think. How esoteric and obscure – and what excellent material for the conspiracy theories of Dan Brown or the magical realism of Harry Potter. But wait. Alchemy’s not dead. We’ve simply transposed it into a new medium. Today we expend far greater energy, and shape our lives far more systematically, on a similar search. It’s the quest for power. Our whole education system, of which this campus is one of the great temples, is structured to create people of power. Our news bulletins are full of who is going to run for office, our advertisements boast a new gadget that can control everything and everyone with a single click, and our lifestyle supplements feature a new study that suggests if you smile a lot people will be more likely to do what you tell them. Our diets and personal goals are dominated by vitamins that give us strength and discoveries that the world belongs to those who rise early.

But this relentless quest for power has its own philosopher’s stone. And that elixir is power over death. Why is medicine the greatest focus of worship in our culture? Because it appears to promise this elusive power – power not just to prolong or enhance life, but power over death itself. All aspects of our quest for power are mini-versions of this fundamental form of power. Of course medicine doesn’t give us this power; and it never will. But we want this power so badly – so badly as we helplessly watch a loved one die, so desperately as we feel our own strength inexorably fading and our youth evaporating, so urgently as we sense our greatest strivings coming to dust. And our inability to attain this primal power only makes us long for it more.

I want to suggest to you that our culture’s quest for power is based on a fundamental mistake. That fundamental mistake is laid bare in the opening chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians, where we read about power but we also read about something more significant than power. The problem with power is not just that power over death, which is the goal of all quests for power, is and will remain out of our reach – although that is true. The problem is that our quest for power, and for the eternal life we hope that power will bring, is one colossal detour from the quest that we were really made for and the gift that God truly offers us. This accumulation of power is one enormous insurance policy against there being no God. But the insurance policy fails because it’s powerless to deliver eternal life – which is the one thing we need it for. And what God offers us more than anything else isn’t power. What God offers us is glory.

“Glory” is a word that comes up over and over again in the Bible. The word appears no less than six times in the first chapter of Ephesians. But glory’s a word that we seldom dwell on, because somehow it becomes generic God-language, like “almighty” and “holy.” But we *should* dwell on it, because it’s the whole identity and purpose of God summed up in a single word. It’s pretty close to the most important word of them all. Which is why it’s hard to do it justice with other words.

Let’s quickly look at the words that are a bit like it to see why glory’s so special. Glory’s whole lot more than praise or fame. “Praise” is one-way and conversational; glory’s shared and beyond words. “Fame” is empty and transitory; glory’s wondrous and eternal. Glory’s different from holiness. “Holiness” is part of the identity of God; glory is something that comes to fulfilment as God shares it with us, like a cloud that billows out as we enter it. “Ecstasy” is a word that conjures up the intensity of glory – that sense that everything else pales by comparison. But ecstasy is an out-of-the-body experience we discover on our own, whereas glory’s deeper than the ordinary rather than outside it, something we fundamentally share with

God and others. “Joy” is something wondrous and godly and eternal, but joy is simple and direct whereas glory is mysterious and trembling in a fabulous place beyond joy.

Glory is the *wonder of the full presence of God* that reveals God’s utter desire to be present to us in joy and delight and attention and love; and at the same time it’s the *magnetic, billowing aura* that draws us inexorably into intimate, thrilling, everlasting and fulfilling discovery of our destiny in God. It’s both the cloud of unknowing and the seeing God face to face, all at the same time. But it’s not something for keeping – it’s something for sharing. Glory’s what God created us to enter and to enjoy and to share. Glory’s the complete and overwhelming revelation of God’s character, and God’s character is ever-expanding, ever-embracing, ever-enfolding enjoyment of us.

Here’s the mistake we make. Our mistake is *to think we need the power to get the glory*. Glory seems elusive and distant, whereas power is something tangible and only just out of reach. So we concentrate all our energy on getting the power. We sacrifice to get the power, we train to get the power, we betray to get the power, we lie and cheat and steal to get the power, we dream about the power, we work to get the power, we shape our whole existence to get the power. But then we face a double tragedy. Either we fail in our quest, and we die regretting that we never *got* the power, the influence, the recognition, the strength, the achievement, the money, the acclaim – yet still believing as much as ever that it’s really about the power. Or, even worse, we *do* get the power, and we’ve turned our whole life to get the power, so we’ve nothing left to offer when we realize that the power doesn’t get us anything – certainly not the glory. In other words we die a poor fool or a rich fool.

But the truth is *the power isn’t the way to get the glory. The glory is the way to get the power*. It’s not that power is pointless, useless, or wrong. Look again at Ephesians chapter one: power is mentioned four times in quick succession, three of those times in a positive sense. There is a kind of power that comes from God, and it’s precisely what the alchemy of human quests for power has always searched for. It’s the resurrection of the dead. But here’s the crucial point: *you only discover that power if you’re prepared to enter the glory*. Remember the words of John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and *we have seen his glory*.” That’s what the disciples did over and over again, when in moments we call miracles they beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ – in other words they saw in Jesus God’s ever-expanding, ever-embracing, ever-enfolding enjoyment of each one of us. And that culminated in the cross, where Jesus hung naked, stripped, shamed, humiliated, defenseless. The cross was where Jesus was emptied of every ounce of power. But this is the moment more than any other *when we behold his glory* – his ever-expanding, ever-embracing, ever-enfolding encircling of us. If we discover the glory of the cross, we shall receive the power of the resurrection. That’s the whole of the Christian faith. The glory is the way to get to the power.

But notice the tragedy of how badly we get it wrong. Notice how badly the church has got this wrong in generations beyond number. *The church thought it needed the power to see the glory*. The church thought it needed to control government, through the constitution or through manipulation of our political leaders. The church thought it needed to control people’s behavior, through laws or guilt trips or hectoring or shaming. The church thought it needed to control education, to determine foreign policy, to vilify other faiths, to marginalize women and minorities, to expel other kinds of Christians, to uphold slavery and segregation, to colonize the developing world, to censor what people could read, to shape what schools could teach. The church thought it needed the power to see the glory. What a tragedy, what a litany of woe that has been.

And maybe that’s been your story too. I wonder if you look over your life and see moments when you thought you needed power, power to make something of your life, power to assert yourself, power of knowledge, charisma, sex-appeal, expertise, class, language, power over things, power over people, power over children or spouse or staff. And I wonder if looking at that power you realize it was all one kind of power – power over death, over oblivion, over being snuffed out, wasted, buried and forgotten. I wonder if you thought you needed the power to get the glory. I wonder if you still think so.

Well if that’s you, hear the good news. God alone has that power. It’s called the power of the resurrection. You’ll never get it for yourself. You can only be given it. And God gives it to those who open their hearts to share the glory. Resurrection comes when you’re so excited by the glory that you stop worrying about your

own survival, your own power over death. Eternal life isn't a product of our power. It's a side-effect of God's glory. Seek the glory, and you'll be given the power. Seek only the power, and you'll never find your way to the glory.

And this is what saints are. The saints are those who witness through the ages that it's not about the power – it's about the glory. In a lot of cases the lives of the saints witness that obsessing about the power is precisely what *prevents* us seeing the glory. The saints are those who've seen the glory. They're people like Jean de Caussade, who taught us about what he called the sacrament of the present moment. He showed us that you don't have to be grand, clever, kind or even good, you just have to stay still and look deeply into the heart and life and wonder of things and you can enter the glory. They're people like Laurence, who was ordered at knife-point to gather the riches of the church. He responded by inviting the poor, the blind and the lame and saying, "Behold, the riches of the church." In other words, he said, "Open your eyes and comprehend the glory." They're people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The night before he died he knew he didn't have the power but he said, "Mine eyes have *seen* the glory." That very moment when you stop demanding the power and open your eyes and your soul and your heart to see the glory, the glory of God's ever-expanding, ever-embracing, ever-enfolding enjoyment of you and all around you – that's the moment you become a saint too. Then, and only then, will you receive a power beyond anything the world can give or even know. You can do it this very second, now.

In 1940 the Catholic writer Graham Greene wrote a novel called *The Power and the Glory*. It's set in Mexico in the 1930s. The Mexican government is determined to suppress the Catholic church, sending paramilitary groups into the provinces to persecute priests. The story centers on a whisky priest, a flawed and fallible man who's fathered a child, likes a drink, and is always on the run. Pursuing him is a lieutenant of the police, a disciplined socialist who wants to obliterate the church. Two factors inhibit the priest's escape. First, he truly loves his child, awkward and ugly as she is, and shameful as her existence may be. Second, he comes out of hiding to hear the confession of a dying man – even though deep down he suspects that he's being lured into a trap. Sure enough, the priest is captured and the lieutenant orders his execution.

You might think such a flawed human being is an unlikely place for God to reveal the glory. We're accustomed to saying God shows the glory to those who suffer. But just as vital to the gospel is that God reveals the glory to sinners too. Sinners like you and me.

What the story shows us is that the lieutenant has won the power, but cannot comprehend the glory. Meanwhile the fallible, gullible, pitiful priest has lost all his power: but nonetheless – or maybe consequently – he glimpses, and reveals, the glory. It's almost as if the more fragile and foolish the priest becomes, the more he sees and shows us the glory. The challenge of the story is that, only as the priest, and through him the church, are crucified, do we get to see the glory. It leaves us with a stark choice: are we determined to seize the power, or are we willing to be embraced by the glory? Will it take crucifixion for us to realize it's not about the power, it's about the glory?

And that's the choice these words from Ephesians are putting before us today. Do you want to be with Saul and the persecutors, holding the power, or do you want to be with Stephen, seeing the glory? Do you want to be with Bull Connor and the fire hoses and the attack dogs, holding the power, or do you want to be with Martin Luther King, seeing the glory? Do you want to be with Pope Innocent III, holding the power, or do you want to be with Francis of Assisi, seeing the glory? Do you want to be in a Nasdaq boardroom, wielding the power, or do you want to be in a L'Arche community, sitting on the floor day after day with a Downs syndrome adult, seeing the glory?

Enter the glory, and you'll be given the power. That's what it means to be a saint. Maybe you look back on your life and say, "I've been determined to save myself by gaining the power." Maybe right here, right now, is the moment when you say, "I've been going about this the wrong way. My God, My God, forget the power. Embrace me with the glory."