

### FINDING GLORY!

My late father was a big fan of movies. But while money was tight growing up, we were often treated to a night at the theater. At first, of course, the films were mostly Disney features. In fact, the first movie I ever saw was *Snow White*. In time though we graduated to live action films, like *Swiss Family Robinson*. And eventually more adult films, like *To Sir, With Love*. On our birthdays we were given a choice: go to dinner and a movie with Dad, or have a party. Being the introverted film buff that I was, I always chose the dinner and movie option. Frankly, given the choice, that's still my favorite go-to leisure activity!

I can't remember all the movies I've seen in my sixty-six years, but some stand out very strongly in my memory. *Easy Rider*, with Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson as two motorcycle riding hippies. *West Side Story*, with its infectious melodies and heart-rending story. And my all-time favorite, *Places in the Heart*, the 1980 Best Picture with Sally Fields, Danny Glover, John Malkovich and Ed Harris.

I am not a big fan of war movies, but one that does hold a grip on my memory is the 1989 film *Glory!* It was one of Denzel Washington's early films, and earned him an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor. If you never saw it, or don't remember it, *Glory!* tells the true story of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment in the Union Army during the American Civil War.

The 180,000 black soldiers in the Union Army have often been overlooked in history, but they were a crucial part of the war effort. And while a majority of the soldiers in the 54<sup>th</sup> were free black men from the north, many others were escaped or freed slaves. But slave or free most all of them lived lives marked by restrictions due to the color of their skin. And the military itself was segregated.

The 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment was only the second all-black unit in the Union Army. Blacks were not allowed to serve as officers, so the regiment was led by white officers. The film traces their development as a unit, and recounts the various struggles they faced, including the inequity in pay. Black soldiers were only paid \$10 a month, compared to white soldiers, who were paid thirteen.

When the Emancipation Proclamation was pronounced, in December of 1862, the Confederacy responded by ordering that black soldiers captured in battle wearing Union Army uniforms, and their white officers, were to be executed immediately. Honorable discharges were offered to blacks in the North, but the men of the 54<sup>th</sup> refuse to give up the fight.

At first the 54<sup>th</sup> is relegated to support duties, cooking and so on, but finally they are allowed to engage in combat, and is the lead unit in the assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. Most of them die in the battle, but many historians feel that assault helped turn the war around.

The film's music, written by James Horner, underscores the stirring story of courage, and is most notable, perhaps, in the film's trailer, which depicts various scenes of the unit marching and struggling in battle, captioned by the words, "They joined for freedom . . . They fought for honor . . . They found glory!"

Finding glory. More often than not, it is something we do associate with warfare. But while I don't want to take anything away from the 54<sup>th</sup>, or any other military unit, while I don't want to dim the glory that can be found in courageously standing up for the right in life-threatening circumstances, I do want to suggest glory can be found in other places, at other times. In fact, I want to suggest that glory is all around us, everywhere and all the time. And ultimately, that is what our passage from Matthew is all about.

Peter, James and John have been following Jesus for close to three years. They've seen him perform countless healings. They've heard him preach and listened to him teach. But they keep missing the point. They keep failing to understand the nature of his mission and the profound meaning of his words.

Now it was Jesus' practice to go off every once and awhile to meditate and pray. It was an opportunity for him to recharge and reconnect with God. Usually he went by himself—he was a great believer in the value of solitude and silence. But occasionally he'd bring along a few of his closest friends.

After a long and exhausting stretch of healing and teaching, Jesus needs a break. So, he invites Peter, James and John to go on retreat. Tradition has it that the mountain they climb was Mount Tabor. I've been there; it's quite a climb! Probably by the time they get to the top the apostles are just plain worn out. The text says, "They are weighed down with sleep."

Have you tried to pray or meditate when you've been really wiped out? Very tough. It's hard not to simply doze off. That's apparently what happens.

But while they slumber, all sorts of stuff are happening. For Jesus is suddenly surrounded by light—he fairly glows! And then there are two men standing beside him, Moses and Elijah. The great lawgiver, and the premier prophet. And the three of them begin to talk.

The apostles wake up to all the commotion. As Eugene Peterson translates, "When they came to, rubbing their eyes, they saw Jesus in his glory . . . ." (*The Message*, 874)

Thinking this is a one-time event, they suggest building booths, putting up some sort of structure to mark the occasion. This is the place where it happened, where Jesus shone in glory. But in doing so they completely miss the point. It's not that suddenly Jesus is covered in glory—rather it is a pointed reminder that glory is all around us. Everyday! Everywhere! And we just need to wake up and see it! For it is right in front of us all the time! In the common places and people of life. Even in those people and places where we least expect it—like a rag tag unit of black soldiers many thought only good for peeling potatoes or scrubbing pots or a carpenter's son from a lowly, no account place like Nazareth.

Or a young woman born into a well-to-do family back in the early part of the nineteenth century. Her mother died when she was only six, and so she and her siblings were raised by their aunt. She received a decent education for a woman back in those days. Indeed, she became fluent in seven languages. But when she married her husband, he largely restricted her to the kitchen and the nursery. Still, her literary talent and her burning desire to help those who were oppressed burned within her. In time her husband allowed her to help edit the abolitionist newspaper that he published. And she published a volume of poetry in 1954 behind his back.

In 1861 when the Civil War broke out, she longed to help the Union cause. But being a woman, the most she was expected to do was make underwear and knit socks which would be sent to the Union soldiers, and maybe pack up some care packages of comforting touches of home. Not that those things were unimportant or trivial. Still, she felt she could do more if she would only be allowed to use her skills more fully.

Late that year, she visited Washington D.C. with her father and some others. One afternoon they rode out of the city accompanied by Reverend James Clarke to observe a review of the troops. But no sooner than the review had begun, the involved soldiers were called away to go to the aid of a group of Union soldiers who had been ambushed.

On their way back to the city, they were accompanied by a phalanx of soldiers marching back to their base in Washington. As they rode along, she and others in the coach, began to sing songs including one about the abolitionist John Brown. It had a stirring tune, and spoke of the deceased abolitionist's body "a-moldering in the grave."

Pastor Clarke turned to her, "Why do you not write some good words to that stirring tune?"

"I wish I might!" she responded.

Her daughter writes: "Very early the next morning, when the east was still gray, my mother awoke, and found to her amazement that lines of poetry seemed to shaping themselves in her mind. . . . She lay still and the words went on . . . By and by the whole poem was complete in her mind. . . . She rose at once, found a sheet of paper and an old stump of a pencil . . . and began to write down the lines . . . ." (Laura Richards, "Julia Ward Howe," [www.juliawardhowe.com](http://www.juliawardhowe.com))

Her poem was sent to the *Atlantic Monthly*, and printed in February of the next year. Soon it was being sung by many, to the tune of *John Brown's Body*, including soldiers in their camps. It's first stanza is still emblazoned on many a heart.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory" Julia Ward Howe had written, "Of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage,  
Where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed his fateful lightening with his terrible swift sword;  
His truth is marching on."

Reflecting on her visit to troops in the outskirts of the city, Howe wrote that the glory of the Lord, could be seen in “the watchfires of a hundred circling camps . . . .” But it is the third stanza that spoke most clearly about Howe’s understanding of the war and its purpose:

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,  
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me,  
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make them free,  
God’s truth is marching on.

For Howe, the war was a necessary evil, the only way that slavery would finally be brought to an end. She abhorred war—in fact, after 1865 she spent the rest of her days working for international peace, even proposing that Mother’s Day be focused on mothers promoting peace. For Howe, there was nothing glorious about war itself, rather, the fact that soldiers, white and black, were willing to give up life itself for the greater good and to bring an end to the peculiar institution, as slavery was called—that was where glory could be found. For she understood that glory can be found in the most unexpected places, in the most unexpected people. The question on this Transfiguration Sunday—indeed on every day of the year—is simply this. Will you be awake to see it? Will you be open to finding glory?

Amen  
John H. Danner