Daniel 5:1-9, John 7:14-18

“To God be the glory”

If I were to ask you what was the major event that took place this past week what would you say? Lance Armstrong. Let me ask you how many of you follow cycling regularly or saw the Tour de France on TV at all from 1999 to 2005? With Oprah embracing this story it became a big news event even for those who don’t care about cycling.

I remember preaching a sermon about 10 years ago after I had gone over to a member’s house to watch Oprah because I had never seen it before and I had made a remark about her. I realized that in many ways Oprah had become the spiritual leader of the United States. Where do you go when you have a problem? Who helps you out financially? Who lifts you up when you’re down? We can’t compete with that can we as a church?

But Lance Armstrong and his fall follows in a long line of people who have built themselves up and wanted their glory over any other concern in their lives. I think of other celebrities and well known people that got so big that they thought their power and glory would never come to an end. Tiger Woods, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Bakker, Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich…and many others.

But thankfully we can also name a number of people who did not put their glory before the glory of others and so their legacy is very different from those that we mentioned. They were able to leave a legacy of goodness and change the world for the better and far outlasted whatever character flaws they may have had. I think of Mother Theresa, Ghandhi, and one of my alltime favorite heroes, Martin Luther King Jr.

We just got back from our church retreat and we stressed what it will take to build a community and it has to be leaders that are willing to put their desires behind and place the glory of God as absolutely primary. As we ordain elders and deacons and install trustees we recognize the importance of being able to understand this concept.

Our Scripture for today addresses both sides of this issue. In our OT reading we find King Belshazzar who not only lives for his glory but mocks God in the process. Then in John we find Jesus along our journey through John who stresses the importance of giving all the glory to God. Let’s read.

**READ**

You’ve heard the saying: I saw the handwriting on the wall which means that you could have pretty much predicted what was going to happen next, and it isn’t going to be good. But did you know that the statement comes from this specific Scripture?

Belshazzar and his father Nebuchadnezzar had both given the people of Israel a hard time. Nebuchadnezzar had raided the temple where God was to have been thought to reside and so Belshazzar has a bad legacy at his back. We pick up the Scripture and we read that he is drunk, mocking God by eating and drinking from the gold that was gathered from the temple. Another example of someone in power who thinks that they are above reproach and will never be caught.

But in vs.20 we read that he and his father both had a similar approach to life: his heart was lifted up and his spirit hardened so he acted proudly, and – this is key now, “His glory was stripped of him.” When we act proudly, haughtily as if no once can touch us then we will have our glory stripped from us because we actually care about our glory.

But Daniel, now he is someone who only cared about the glory of God. Even when he is made the 3rd in command he continues to go privately to his room, shut the door and give God the glory and honor. We are so used to seeing athletes and others give God the glory publicly. Ray Lewis was so excited last week after they won their playoff game that it sounded like the rapture had just come and he was thanking God for counting him in that number. Publicly at times we think it is to our benefit to give God the glory, while privately that is where God is actually able to work and be glorified.

Daniel understood that and God blessed him bountifully and delivered him from situation after situation where his life was in danger. The writing on the wall which forecast the downfall of Belshazzar was a result of his pride and his need for people to glorify him. If we are not in time with God’s voice we will miss his glory and his voice and focus on and pay attention to the voice of Oprah, or some other person whose first intentions aren’t necessarily the glorifying of God.

I’m guessing that for the most part we do not consciously make that decision and say to ourselves that we are choosing to glorify ourselves, but it happens in a very surreptitious and covert way. You know popularity is fun. Even the Scripture tells us that the early church had the goodwill of all the people, and that was a good thing. When you walk down the streets of Strasburg and everyone knows your name and they’re always glad you came, it can make your head spin.

We have in this church a good representation of outstanding citizens of this community who are very well respected and known. This does not have to come at a cost, we should be able to be liked, like Daniel, and not sacrifice our integrity with pride like Belshazzar. If we turn from our Savior and start to look for our own glory then we need to look for the writing on the wall, no matter who we are. Not a single one of us above our Lord, and that will become evident if we continue to live as if we are.

Jesus knew that. He was immensely popular. Crowds of people surrounded him everywhere he went and he could have very easily turned his situation into a cash cow as Armstrong did. He told his brothers last week that he wasn’t going to go to Jerusalem, but today we see that he ends up going anyway. Where do we find him? He is teaching in the temple, the place where he is the most in danger because it is the religious leaders who are seeking his life to put to an end.

You know, I wonder what the leaders of the temple were thinking. Here is your rival teaching about God in a way that you disagree with and they let it happen. It would be as if here at First Presbyterian we had some pastors come and begin teaching on their own. Wait, but we have the Rev. Fran Carr who is leading a Sunday School class, we have the ordained pastor Terry McCall teaching a Sunday School class, we have Rev. McConnell who is chomping at the bit to get involved. I love that aspect of our church that leaders of the church can’t wait to get involved. I can’t wait to see how God will be glorified because our common goal and purpose is one, that God would be glorified. It is the only way that any of this is possible. When we start thinking about our own personal interests and put them ahead of the mission of the church then the writing will be on the wall in a hurry.

But there’s Jesus teaching in the temple, a pastor who isn’t ordained by any man, but by God, who was uneducated by man, had no security clearances and took no child safety courses, surrounded by a bunch of illiterate fishermen. Definitely did not take place in the Presbyterian Church. Our pastors have to go to college and then preferable graduate from Princeton, although there are probably some other acceptable institutions where they could attend.

Where does Jesus get his authority and on whose behalf is he teaching? That was the question that is asked in this Scripture. Whose glory are you celebrating? Jesus responds by saying his teaching isn’t his, but rather his Father’s. He states that those who speak on their own seek their own glory, but those who speak on behalf of God are true.

Stay with me now as we follow in the Scripture. How do we discuss the teachings that we receive if they are for the glory of God or for someone else’s glory. This whole event surrounding Lance Armstrong’s fall has really unveiled the motives behind his life which was for his own glory. I think of the legacy that people leave behind, teachers of the Gospel whose message is often contradicted by their lifestyle as they live at a level that is so above their parishioners.

But are we any different and shouldn’t we also look at our own lives and see where we try to focus on our desires which drown out God’s desires. When we look at the legacy that Jesus left behind we can’t help but not only mention the salvation of humankind that gives us eternal life, but when you look at the developing countries around the world where there are hospitals and schools founded by Christians, now that’s a legacy built upon the solid rock of our Savior.

Martin Luther King Jr. is an American figure whose historical legacy is much debated. This has always puzzled me. I remember in 1996 when I spoke to 12,000 youth at Pompeii as the toke Protestant and the rally was called “Keep the Dream Alive”, and it was a commemoration of what this man did that impacted not just the United States but the entire world. This reality might be seen more clearly overseas than it is seen here in America, after all a prophet is not honored in his home country.

I’ll never forget when I was approached by an elder in the church where I served in Florida who was upset because we had a pulpit exchange with an African American church and he said: “God has given them a role of subjugation to us. We should not be interacting with them.” Here up north this mindset is more institutionalized and a lot more subtle, but still present.

God made us regardless of race from the same dirty mud. He breathed life into all of us and loves us equally and is saddened by how we create a caste system wehre some people seem to have more value than others. At the root of this desire is our wanting to uplift our desire s and our glory above others and so we make up illogical reasons for why people are inferior such as the color of their skin. Since that is the case then they shouldn’t have the same jobs, or the same pay, and should be locked up immediately without really trying to get them on a fair trial.

If we seek our own glory God cannot be glorified and when our actions come to light then all will be revealed. If we live for our own glory, then the falseness will cause it to crumble. But if we work for the glory of God in our marriage, at work, or at school, or in church, then we too can become a legacy that will have an impact on people’s lives that will give God the glory. Amen.