



Cups and Crowns: A Christmas Message

Remarks by Head of School Lee Burns '87
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Perhaps no event in the world generates so much passion for so many people as the World Cup, which is held once every four years to crown the country with the best football team...or, as we call it in America, the best soccer team. The World Cup focuses the attention of nearly every country on one sport in one area for 29 days as 64 games are contested to declare a global champion.

So I turned on my TV on Saturday morning for the U.S. game versus the Netherlands, and the 9:00 am pregame introduction began with the deep and iconic voice of the famed actor Morgan Freeman posing a question: do you believe?

16 nations, including the United States, could still hold out hope, even belief, that they might vanquish all the others and hoist the cup next week. The American commentators, themselves former World Cuppers, conveyed an enthusiastic optimism that the American team could compete with any team in the world, and this might finally be the time for the U.S. to make a deep run or even win the cup.

The atmosphere of the stadium in Qatar was electric, with its exquisite pageantry, pride-filled national anthems, and fervent fans unfurling flags, singing and chanting.

As the game started, I still had that question running through my head: do you believe? At that moment, it was hard not to believe.

That afternoon, I saw another kickoff, but this one in person and of American football, as the Georgia Bulldogs battled the LSU Tigers in the SEC Championship game in Atlanta. They, too, were fighting for supremacy, not of the world, but of a region and eventually of a country against Wolverines and Horned Frogs and Buckeyes in the weeks to come.

The Mercedes Dome was awash in red— Georgia Bulldog red—and as their band played their fight song and their fans barked like dogs and as they blocked a field goal early on and ran it back for a touchdown, it was hard not to be swept up in the belief that UGA would be the SEC champions and eventually the national champions.

Throughout the day, some hopes were vanquished and others soared in stadiums around Qatar and America. Some hopes, like mine, as a Tennessee Vols football fan, had been dashed in the last two weeks, while others, like those of Florida Gator fans, had sunk in a swamp in September. But we had all hoped, we had all believed, for a while at least, in what a Hendon Hooker could do, or what a Nick Saban could do again, and we had all dreamed about a championship.

I believe we are wired as human beings for hope, for longing, for belief...and yes, for a crown.

Of course not simply about sports, but we as individuals, whatever our faith traditions or backgrounds may be, and we collectively as groups and nations, dream and desire, often through seasons of drought and disappointment...and even despair.

As chronicled in the Old Testament of the Bible, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and eventually their tribes and the nation of Israel, were promised by God a Savior, a Messiah, throughout their generational ups and downs, including their slavery and bondage, as a people over thousands of years. They dreamed of a king, a conqueror, to set them free from oppression—of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans—to vanquish the other nations and install them as champions of the world order, with power and prestige, peace and prosperity. Theirs would be the World Cup.

As He often does, however, God had something different—and better—than what the people desired and expected...a different crown, a different cup.

If you are a Christian, you and fellow-believers around the world celebrate Christmas this month to mark God sending Jesus, whom they believe to be His Son, into the world as the Savior—as a rescuer, a redeemer, a reconciler—to save a sinful people, to give healing and hope, to crown them as conquerors over despair and death.

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And yet He did it in a radical and stunning and counterintuitive way. Jesus came not as a warrior, not as a military hero or charismatic political leader, nor as a champion for one country, nor as the offspring of the elite or beneficiary of the best worldly training, but as a vulnerable baby born a dangerous birth in a dingy manger to an unknown family from the obscure little town of Nazareth. He came having emptied Himself of His heavenly glory and comforts, entering a world that would torture Him but that He would serve and save through His sacrifice.

He came to give His followers, and His enemies, and all of us, not what they thought they wanted but what He knew they needed.

As you and I sit here in the comforts not simply of this chapel, but in the relative comforts of our lives 2,000 years removed from that silent night in Bethlehem, what do we want, and what do we really need? Unlike the Israelites and countless others throughout human history and even today, we aren't enslaved, oppressed or impoverished.

Or are we?

The women and men of the Bible are diverse and varied in their backgrounds and beliefs. Some are poor, while others are powerful. Some are well-educated elites, while others are simple fishermen and carpenters. Some are religious, while others are not. They can be moralistic or marginalized or materialistic, sick or saintly or sadistic. But what they all shared in common was this, whether they could see it or not: they were sinners in a broken world, in need of a savior to bring them meaning and hope and joy. And too often, almost always, they looked for it in the wrong places. Like we can easily do.



It's common to build a life on achievements – hard work to earn good grades, win games, get good jobs and promotions. Or on money – earning and storing up currencies and stocks to provide financial security and items and experiences that feel good. Or on good character – doing the right thing, following the rules, meeting the expectations of others to impress them and build your own reputation. Or on following your heart – being true to and pursuing your deepest beliefs and desires. Or on love – finding that right person whose love will set your heart ablaze. Or even on religion – obeying the commands and morals to please the god or spirit to earn their favor and blessing.

And yet each of these as a foundation for life, despite the positive elements about each of them, will one day fade and fail and leave us floundering.

The Bible tells us that, at our core, despite being made in the image of God, despite being loved by God, we are all sinners as we rebelled against God as we seek to be our own god instead of following Him as our maker. Our rebellion created a chasm between a perfect God and sinful humans that we cannot overcome or bridge, despite our best and often good intentions and efforts.

God sent Jesus into the world to bridge that impossible chasm, to bring us back into right-relationship with Him and to experience the peace and joy and hope that comes only from Him. His life wasn't simply to teach us what to believe and how to live, but it was to be a sacrifice for the sins of humans to satisfy the perfect justice of God. Sacrificing His son for us through His brutal death on the cross for our sins, taking our punishment Himself, was the ultimate act of love...of grace...our getting what we don't deserve and God wasn't obligated to give us. He did it out of his perfect love for us.

It's possible to experience Christmas each year, and think about the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, in a very intellectual, mechanical, desensitized way. Or simply as a spectator or a cheering fan. Or even in a sentimental way. But when that's all we do, we miss out on the transformative power...the way it can change our hearts, our affections, our lives.

In Victor Hugo's famous French novel of the 19th century, *Les Miserables*, the protagonist, Jean Valjean, has served 19 years in prison for stealing bread for his starving sister and her family. Upon his release, now a bitter and hardened man, Valjean seeks an inn for the night, but no one will take in a former criminal. Homeless and desperate, he knocks on the door of Bishop Myriel, who graciously takes him in, feeds him, gives him a warm bed and clothes, and invites him to stay. That night, Valjean steals the silver of the priest and flees. The police, though, soon catch him and take him back to the bishop for confirmation of the theft. The theft will land him in jail for the rest of his life, if not cost him his life. As the police are explaining to Myriel about the theft, the priest warmly greets him, explains to the police that he had given Valjean the silver and hands him two silver candlesticks which Valjean had not taken, saying, essentially, "My friend, you forgot these. Go in peace with these."

Jean Valjean is stunned by the grace...so powerful and personal. The remainder of the novel recounts his transformation into a new man: a man of love and grace, of service and sacrifice, of hospitality and generosity.

In October of 2006, Charles Roberts entered a one room Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, with a gun and killed five young girls and injured others before killing himself. The Amish parents and community were devastated over this senseless tragedy, but rather than lashing out in anger or vengeance or blame, they went that afternoon to the Roberts family to tell Charles' parents that they are praying for them on the loss of their child and that they forgive Charles and the family. In the upcoming days, they would attend the funeral of the killer, donate money to his family, and extend countless acts of love and compassion to the Roberts family.

How could they possibly do that?

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof opened fire at a Bible study in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine people. In the following days at Roof's court hearing, relative after relative after relative of the victims stunned the country with their words of forgiveness spoken directly to the killer and inspired the country as they sang "Amazing Grace" at the funeral of victim Clementa Pickney.

Amazing Grace indeed.



Horatio Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman living in Chicago in the 1870's with his wife and five children. Life was good, very good in fact, until unexpectedly his son died, and then the Great Chicago Fire destroyed nearly all his real estate investments. He thought a trip to Europe would be good for the grieving family, so his wife and four daughters boarded a ship for Europe, and he would come later after he wrapped up his work schedule. Days later, he received a telegram from his wife with the awful

news that their ship had sunk and that their four daughters had drowned. On a ship to meet his heartbroken wife, he sailed by the spot where the ship had sunk, and there he penned one of the most famous hymns often sung in churches, entitled, It is Well With My Soul, whose first verse is, “When peace, like a river, attendeth my soul, When sorrows, like a sea billows roll, Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.”

How could Horatio’s soul be well?

The Amish in Nickel Mines, the church members in Charleston, Horatio Spafford on the sea—what they had in common was a trust in God. In His love. In His goodness. In His power. In His plan. In His grace. In His salvation. That trust—their deep trust, having marinated deeply in their minds and hearts through regular prayer and Bible study and reflection and worship—changed their lives. Their faith equipped them with the resources to endure loss—real loss, not the football or soccer kind—with love, peace and hope.

God calls us to see ourselves differently. To see how enslaved we are to worldly desires that will let us down. To see how oppressed we are by our own expectations..and those of others. To see how impoverished in spirit we are. He calls us to live differently. To let Him be King of our lives. To let Him give us what we cannot do for ourselves. To lay down our worries and fears, our strivings and justifications. To repent. To be both humbled and affirmed. To trust Him in the good and bad times. To love our neighbors, and our enemies, too. To forgive. To be joyful, peace-filled and grace-fueled. To hope. To trust. To believe.

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He calls us not to achieve Him, not to win Him by our hard work or good deeds or goals, not to rely on the scoreboard or a team or our fellow fans, but simply to receive Him, as a gift – the ultimate gift and grace. And He promises that, with His spirit and power, as only He can, He will change us.

And He says let me crown you—not because of your victory, but because I first wore a crown of thorns on my way to the cross for you. Let me crown you with the ultimate prize—as my beloved child with my perfect record. And let me give you a cup far better than the World Cup. Here is my cup of communion with you because I first drank a cup of God’s wrath so you could drink and enjoy with me the sweetness of this cup.

May the upcoming days be a season of sweetness, hope and belief.

