

Sermon: Imperishable Inheritance

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 12, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Hockey Sweater is the title of a short story by Canadian author Roch Carrier, originally published in 1979, in French, under the title "Une abominable feuille d'érable sur la glace" ("An abominable maple leaf on the ice"). The story, based on the real-life experience of Carrier growing up in a small town in Quebec, describes an unbearable ordeal he had to endure, that is being forced to wear the jersey of the rival Toronto Maple Leafs. You see, Carrier and all his friends were fans of Maurice Richard, the superstar of the Montreal Canadiens hockey club.

Allow me to read an excerpt from the story: "I remember very well the winter of 1946. We all wore the same uniform as Maurice Richard, the red, white and blue uniform of the Montreal Canadiens, the best hockey team in the world. We all combed our hair like Maurice Richard, and to keep it in place we used a kind of glue—a great deal of glue. We laced our skates like Maurice Richard. We cut his pictures out of all the newspapers. Truly, we knew everything there was to know about him. On the ice, when the referee blew his whistle the two teams would rush at the puck; we were five Maurice Richards against five other Maurice Richards, throwing themselves on the puck. We were ten players all wearing the uniform of the Montreal Canadiens, all with the same burning enthusiasm. We all wore the famous number 9 on our backs."

However, Carrier's jersey was well-worn, needing to be replaced. When his mother ordered the replacement from the Eaton's Company, without specifying the team, what came back through the mail was not the glorious number 9 on blue-blanc-rouge, but a plain jersey of Montreal's bitter rival, the Toronto Maple Leafs. Afraid of offending Monsieur Eaton, an English gentleman, his mother insisted that Carrier must wear that abominable jersey to his hockey practices. As one would expect, the little boy faced persecution of his peers, his coach, and even the referee. He was shunned, not permitted to join the game at all. When he protested by smashing his stick, Carrier was promptly sent, by a young curate (kind of like an assistant to the parish priest), to the church, to pray to God and to

repent. The story ends with the little boy praying that God would send ‘a hundred million moths’ to eat up his dreaded Toronto Maple Leafs sweater.

It is a fabulous little story, an iconic piece of Canadian literature that provides us a glimpse of life in rural Quebec in the 1950’s. It exemplifies our nation’s enduring passion for hockey, while touching, however mildly, on the tensions that have existed between francophones and anglophones, even till this day. That being said, what really intrigues me is the little boy’s prayer, for God to send a swarm of moth to consume that which is abominable and perishable—the sweater of a rival team.

There is a tried and true biblical tradition of utilizing the allegory of ‘moth eating up a garment’. We find it in Isaiah 51:7-8, *“Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts; do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my deliverance will be forever and my salvation to all generations.”*

In the context of the Second Isaiah, the prophet was encouraging the exiled community of Israel to not be dismayed. In face of harsh persecution hoisted upon them by other nations and empires, they were assured that such persecution would pass, for it was only temporary. Furthermore, they are encouraged to look for God’s deliverance, as the Lord had done so in the time of Exodus, God will certainly do so again, for the Lord God is merciful and compassionate. God’s anger of our disobedience is only short-lived, but God’s deliverance and salvation, based on love, is everlasting, to thousands of generations, essentially forever. As declared by Isaiah in yet another passage, of Isaiah 50:9, *“It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.”*

We find the same expression in the epistle of James 5:1-3. This time the intended target of moth is not persecution, but worldly riches, *“Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire.”* Earthly riches and human strength are only temporary, and subject to decay. Those who rely on them, and particularly those who hoard them, or worse use them to oppress others, shall be paid back in full by the righteous judge, in due course.

Perhaps the most succinct and relevant passage is to be found in the teaching of Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, of Matthew 6:19-21, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

All early wealth are susceptible to decay, theft or misuse. There is a tried and true Chinese proverb that 'wealth does not last past three generations', as the first generation makes it, the middle generation keeps it, and the third generation squanders it. Oh, how true it is as we see that dynamic playing out in the affairs of humankind, again and again.

In his epistle, Peter, the first among the Apostle, proclaims, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*" (1 Peter 1:3-4) What is this inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade? It is not your wealth, nor land. It is not your culture, nor ancestry. It is not even your reputation, nor name. From Peter's understanding, Lord Jesus is our inheritance. Much like the Lord God is the inheritance of the tribe of Levi when the Promised Land was divided amongst the twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus is our inheritance, our tribal allotment, in a manner of speaking, for we are '*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the excellence of the Lord who called us out of darkness into God's marvellous light*' (1 Peter 2:9)

Writing to God's elect scattered and exiled throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire, Peter was acutely aware and attuned to the context of persecution of the early church—a persecution that as we now know would only intensify, not subside. So he wrote, "*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire.*" (1 Peter 1:6-7) Faith in the resurrected Jesus that is untested is like gold mixed with much impurities, it needs to be refined, so that it "*may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed*" on that glorious Day of the Lord.

I think of Canada as a wonderful country. I say it as an immigrant who has lived in this country for the past 40 or so years, for the better part of my adult life. I say it with a clear understanding that many people across the globe would cherish an opportunity to live and thrive in this land. No, the country is not perfect, there are still much work to do, to improve upon, but by and large, this country has done well, and people have prospered. I recall a fellow student back in my seminary days had once preached a sermon, describing Canada as the land of milk and honey. Having travelled across this country, and having visited the so-called Holy Land of Israel / Palestine not too long ago, I could not find any reason to disagree with the assertion that Canada is a more fitting land of promise than the biblical Promised Land.

However, as much as I would praise this country, I have this one tiny little complaint: we seem to have abandoned, or in the process of abandoning our Christian faith heritage. We seem to have forgotten much of the core Canadian values of compassion, justice, peace, equality and tolerance are derived from the Christian values. We pride ourselves on being a hockey nation, and there is nothing wrong with that—I for one am a huge fan of the Montreal Canadiens, and would cheer unapologetically should the Habs win another Stanley Cup, maybe even this year. But I always know however wonderful that may be, such prize is ever so perishable, and such glory is incomparable to glory we have in Christ Jesus, who is truly our imperishable inheritance. I wonder, just as Jesus once wondered, on the Day of the Lord when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth, in this land of so much promise?

I shall leave with you yet another short story, a story of John Newton, the former slave trader turned preacher, who penned the lyrics of Amazing Grace. When Newton was in his ripe old age, he was nearly blind, yet still preaching the Gospel. One Sunday morning while delivering his message, he repeated the sentence: "Jesus Christ is precious." His helper whispered to him: "But you have already said that twice." Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, "Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again." The stones in the ancient sanctuary shook as the grand old preacher said again: "Jesus Christ is precious!"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**