

Joy in the Midst of Suffering

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

December 13, 2020

Philippians 1:18b-26

Our text for today is not a typical Advent text. But it is about joy, which is the theme of the third Sunday in Advent, which is today.

It is particularly appropriate for this third Sunday in Advent, because it was written in a time of great stress for Paul. That is putting it mildly. He was in prison. We don't know where or for what reason. But it is clear from his letter that he wasn't sure that he would survive his imprisonment. His prayer was that in his trials he would not be an embarrassment to the cause of Christ. *"It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death."* (1:19-20) He envisioned his life being *"poured out as a libation over a sacrifice."* (2:17)

What is striking about the letter – aside from the fact that Paul thought he might die -- is that the words "joy" and "rejoice" appear 13 times in four brief chapters. Paul rejoices that the Gospel was being proclaimed not in spite of but because of his imprisonment. He rejoices in his special relationship with the believers in Philippi. He rejoices that his co-worker has recovered from a serious illness. The letter to the Philippians is one of the most uplifting books in the New Testament, which, considering the circumstances, is rather remarkable. That makes it an important text for us at this horrific time in our world's life.

Reading your meditations, I have been struck by how many of you, writing in isolation from one another, not in coordination, grounded your thoughts in the current plight of our world. "I find it difficult to think of 'Peace on earth,'" wrote Kristi Sorrelle, "in the time of covid and the uncertainties in our country and the turmoil in the world."

If it difficult to think about peace in this time, and it most certainly is, how much more difficult is it to sing songs of joy – "Rejoice, the Lord is King," "Rejoice, You Pure in Heart," "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," and, of course, "Joy to the World" – when the world is struggling with a plague that has killed a million and a half people and will kill many more before it is through?

A friend said in a brief note a couple of weeks ago: "The holiday this year feels like something calling us less toward celebration and more toward contemplation." Indeed.

I suppose that is we are doing, contemplating joy in the midst of suffering.

Toward that end I would like for you to think of the following real-life story as a parable about the spiritual foundation that makes joy possible even in hard times.

In the early 1970s I was a junior staff member of the First Baptist Church of Waco. I was married, and we had two young children. It was summer, and we were about to take our very first vacation. Every other summer, when we had days off, we visited family in Louisiana. This summer we would take a real vacation like other families.

Our plan was as follows: on Friday we would drive to San Antonio where I would officiate the wedding of a Baylor student on Saturday afternoon. When the wedding was over on Saturday, we would head west into the mountains of New Mexico where we

would spend a week in a friend's cabin. Then we would drive to Colorado for a week of camping.

Friday evening when the wedding rehearsal was over, we checked into a hotel and put the excited kids to bed.

Then my wife – Rosie, whom many of you remember – said, “Now let's unload the car.” The car was a Ford station wagon – one of the long kind -- and it was packed, every inch of it, with camping gear – a tent, four sleeping bags, cooking utensils, a stove, a lantern, food – plus two week's clothes for four people.

“It took an hour to pack the car,” I complained. “And you want to unload it, and then reload it tomorrow morning? Where would we put the stuff? On the floor of our hotel room?”

“I am afraid someone will break into the car tonight and steal everything,” she said, which I thought was ridiculous, and said so. “All the car doors are locked,” I said. “No one is going to break into the car and steal our stuff.”

Finally, either I won the argument or wore her down. We agreed we would not unload the car.

Her last words before we went to sleep were, “Even if they steal everything, we will be okay, right?”

I said, “Yes, we will be okay. Our being okay is not dependent on all the stuff in the car.”

I was happy to hear her come over to my side of the argument, because I was sure I was right and because the next morning, when we went to the parking lot, they had stolen everything. The four doors of the car were wide open, and everything was gone.

But we were okay. We really were.

I know that I will be asked what we did, so I will tell you. I, the practical one, said, “We might as well turn around and go back to Waco.” Rosie said, “We're not going to lose all our stuff and our vacation too. We're going to the store and buy just enough camping gear to get by and one change of clothes to last two weeks for each of us and some big food.” That is when I learned that you can buy peanut butter by the bucket.

It turned out to be a wonderful vacation. Our OKness did not depend on the stuff in the car, including the camping gear, most of which, unfortunately, was borrowed. Just the opposite; our okayness is what made the adventure possible in the first place, and our okayness as a family, our relationship, is what enabled us to survive the seeming disaster.

In the same way, joy in hard times is grounded in one's deep, foundational, sometimes impossible to put into words relationship with God.

How often have you heard someone who experienced a great loss say, “My faith in God is what got me through”? If you asked for an explanation – what exactly does that mean? -- the response was probably along the lines of, “I just knew I wasn't alone. God was with me. Prayer really helped.” If you pushed harder, saying, “But you weren't rescued. You suffered a heavy loss,” s/he replied, “I don't know. I'm okay. We're okay.”

From a biblical perspective joy is not grounded in optimism. It does not require that we look on the bright side of things, closing our eyes to reality if necessary. It doesn't depend on things getting better. In fact, if joy is dependent on good times, joy in hard times is psychologically, spiritually impossible, and Paul's experience is inexplicable.

Yet Paul was insistent that being joyful was possible even when things were going badly. In another letter, he described his seemingly contradictory experience: “*We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.*” (II Corinthians 6:8-10)

Paul could be genuinely joyful on hearing that his friend and colleague Epaphroditus had recovered from what may have been a life-threatening illness even though Paul himself believed that his own life was in danger, because, as he said elsewhere, “*I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.*”

At the outset of this sermon, we asked how we can sing Joy to the World when the world is in such turmoil and anguish. The real question is how can we *not* sing Joy to the World when the world is in such turmoil and anguish? For the world to which we sing joy is not some 19th century Dickensian world in which grouchy old men have nightmares about Christmases past and future then have dramatic conversions and become benevolent grandfathers.

The world to which we must sing joy is our world. Our hurting, suffering world. It is the only world we’ve got, the only world there is.

It is a world in which covid is now the leading cause of death in America, passing heart disease last week. Sing joy to that world.

It is a world in which almost 300,000 America families and a million more around the world enter this holiday season without a loved one. Sing joy to that world.

It is a world in which half of our citizens are mad at the other half because they believe the other half stole their election, and the other half is mad at the first half because they think the first half is out to destroy democracy. Everybody is suspicious of somebody. Sing joy to that world.

We *must* sing joy to our world because our world is in desperate spiritual need.

We *can* sing joy to our world, because our joy is grounded, not in optimism, not in the frivolous platitude that “things are gonna be fine, it’s just a matter of time,” but in our deep, profound relationship with the faithful, loving God “who first loved us and sent his Son,” whose birth we joyfully celebrate during this season.

Benediction

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13) Amen.