

2020 Advent: Joy knowing the Ending

These Sundays in advent we will be taking some time to talk about joy. Joy is something I think we could all use a little of. It's been an interesting year, to say the least, but there have been many before and, sadly, there will be many like it again, should the Lord choose to tarry for the sake of saving more. There will be wars and rumors of war, plague and pestilence in this broken world. Hard to find joy in that all the time.

To top it off we are ending a hard year with, as always, a holiday season that almost always gives way to higher depression rates. And this holiday season perhaps more so, with less chances to see family and friends. A season supposedly so full of joy leaves many saddened and bitter as we reflect on relationships strained, loved ones gone. Reflection done in dark and grey winter days, while we slap on a fake smile because everyone expects us to be happy. O joy!

This sermon series, about Joy, popped up in my mind because I asked in a Bible class, "What is the joy of being a Christian?" No hands shot up right away. And as I reflected, I don't think the answers were exactly in my back pocket either. Are they in yours?

As Christians, we don't get rich or famous, there's certainly doubt, temptation, and discord. Is the Christian life a life of drudgery, walking around glum about the

world, and unable to have any fun because that would break a commandment or something? Is God the crotchety old man who looks for someone having a good time and rushes over to stop it? I think we all know those tropes aren't true, but while we know that, why are we so unable to express the joy we have in Christ?

So today I want to offer up something: The Christian has joy in knowing the end of the story.

I've used the illustration before but it is so near and dear to me I can't help mentioning it again. And let's be honest, it's biblical, our Gospel reading today talks about a colt! So... Colts versus Patriots. Huge rivalry. 2006 AFC championship game. Winner goes to the Super Bowl. My Colts go down 21 points. Back in 2006 I wasn't very happy, I wanted to turn it off, there was no joy for me. So how come I own a DVD copy of that game? Why do I watch it every couple years? Because I know how the game ends. I know Peyton Manning manufactures an amazing comeback and the Colts intercept Tom Brady to seal the win and a trip to a Super Bowl. I know how that ends too, they go on to win that Super Bowl. And so now, when I watch that championship game, each touchdown the Patriots score - that made me so sad before - well now it gives me joy, because I know each hardship will make the victory all that much sweeter. I know the ending, that gives me joy, but not just at the end, even in the midst of the hardship.

So here at the beginning of advent, before the journey even gets going, lets take some time to remember how it ends, and see the joy that is ours because of it. Our Gospel lesson, in a way, does this for us. In our Gospel lesson Jesus rides into Jerusalem in victory. But his battle hasn't been fought. He hasn't had the betrayal, the abandonment, the false trials, the cold night in a cellar, the whips, the nails, the agony of death, the wrath of the Father. Yet he rides the red carpet and accepts the praise of the people, why? Because he knows the ending. He knows he will win. So the people rightly rejoice at his coming.

Here in advent we rejoice at the coming king just the same. But unlike those crowds we know the scope of the King's coming. We know he came not just to give the Romans a little push back, we know he didn't just come to reform the pharisaical ways of the church, we know he came to completely undo the brokenness of the world, our sin, and the power of death. Folks, the universe changed the day Jesus was born, the universe changed when he died, when he rose. It's no wonder stars hang over Bethlehem, the sun goes dark on good Friday. The Creator is at work!

And we fret over little things like death! I say that a bit tongue in cheek, but in all seriousness, it's a *little* thing to Him. He beats it, he gives life eternal. And on the

day of our death, I actually don't think, when we see the fullness of his victory, when he takes us to be with him, I don't think we will be complaining all that much.

But I get it, we aren't there yet. So we look around and don't see stunning rewards for being a Christian. No we see busy-ness, distraction, sickness, heartache, and pain. And we certainly have our share of all of that. It's easy when we focus on the brokenness of the world to simply accept it. It's easy to succumb to the temptations, passions, despair. It's easy when you are down 21 points to just throw in the towel. But folks it's Advent now, lift up your heads, see the bigger picture, see the victory on the horizon. Death is not the worst thing that can happen to you. Let alone the other inconveniences we get bent out of shape about. Christ wins! And those who are with him win too! The holidays are supposed to celebrate that.

I know why the holidays are so depressing, its because we are supposed to be so happy! Yay! But we aren't all the time. And you know what, that's OK. Joy is not the same as being happy. Joy is deeper, it's in your bones, or more accurately, your spirit. Joy lets you mourn that loved one, but with the hope that you will see them again, because you know the ending. Joy doesn't ignore the frustrating realities of the world, but grasps onto the hope that it will be made new, because you know the ending. Joy doesn't lie and say its fun to be alone on the holidays, or sick, or struggling with depression or addiction, or fighting with family, but it remembers

that there is still love to be had and shown in our relationships. Joy gives us motivation to work towards that love, and knows there is a Savior with us now who promises one day all will be forgiven and healed, because joy knows the end of the story.

The holidays are about that promise of victory, given to people who desperately need to hear it. Which means the festivals and celebrations of the Church are not just for those who are put together, have all their family by them, don't have any sorrows. Not at all! It is to give hope to those who don't have any of those things. It's to remind them how the story ends so that in the midst of struggle they can fight the good fight and know they don't fight it alone – a Savior has come!

This baby we celebrate at Christmas is born to die, but not just to die, to rise again and to reign. He wins. The Christian knows that this is a broken world and the devil has got a few haymakers in, a few points on the board. We don't have to be happy about that. But we know who wins. And our Savior has promised that all who are with him, you, people of faith – baptized in his name, he has promised you will win too! Which means, we know there will be reunions, there will be healing, there is forgiveness, there is life – life to the fullest. And knowing it is coming our way gives the Christian courage and joy in the days at hand. Because we know the hardships, we face will one day be badges of perseverance. They will say, “You fought in a war?” “You suffered persecution?” “You taught the children?” “You

had pain for years?” “Wow, praise God he got you through it all.” And what will we respond with the crown of life, won by our Savior, on our heads? We will say, “You are right, praise God. And you know what, it was worth it.”

Church is all about reminding us of that victory. And I hope I can bring that out a bit more in the weeks to come. So that we, the people of God, may be people of courage and joy. A people confident in the victory won. And won for us. God wants you to know it. It’s why he came, it’s why he still comes to us in water, in Word, in bread and wine. We take a feast, “do this in remembrance of me.” He comes to you, literally, to remind you via your taste buds that “Yes, I died for you, I won for you.” Rejoice, it’s true. We know how this all ends.

Hebrews 12:2 - Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.