

## 2020 advent joy in suffering

Ever had a bad day, or a bad week? Some consider this whole year bad, though I don't particularly see how turning a calendar one page is going to magically solve all our problems. I had a bad week this week, I had a falling out with a friend I've known since middle school. Then I got another dose of humility, realizing that I am not the best administrator on the planet. Not a good week for me, personally or professionally. And so it was a jaded, little depressed, and unhappy man who sat down and started writing a sermon on joy, of all things. But even as it seemed hypocritical to write about joy in a bad mood, Paul compels us on in our epistle reading today, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

So it is time to put our money where our mouth is and test the premise I have made throughout this series: that joy is not a congruent to feeling happy, it's a deeper state of mind or worldview even. Is there still meaning, still hope, still love for the one who is lonely, depressed, or heartbroken? Is there still victory, life, and forgiveness for the one who is a failure, dying, or full of regrets?

So far, we have discussed how Christians have joy in "knowing the end of the story," as well as "in knowing they have a joyful God." Yes, we know who wins and we know that our God is not some omnipotent killjoy but a God who delights

in goodness and life. But as we have broached before, this joy as a Christian doesn't slap on a fake smile, nor does it put blinders on to the brokenness of this world. And so, as unhappy as it might sound, for this week, I put forward this premise: "The Christian has joy, yes joy, in a God who shares in their suffering."

Look no further than the Apostle Paul. He was no stranger to having his preaching rejected, was he a failure? He was accustomed to supposed friends turning their backs on him, was he alone? He had a history of shameful persecution of the Church, was he unforgiven? He was beaten, broken, and killed for the sake of Christ, was he afraid or forsaken? In the midst of so many unhappy circumstances the apostle reminds us today: "Rejoice always."

Where was his joy found in the midst of suffering? Colossians 1: "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the Church." He has joy in suffering because he knows it is worth it, worth it because it unites him with Christ who suffered, and worth it for the sake of the people of God, that they might be encouraged, made brave, and stand fast.

We live in a world that is so averse to suffering. And I get it, Paul get's it, it isn't fun, and we certainly don't go looking for it, at least we shouldn't. But I wonder if we have found ourselves in a society that isn't willing to suffer or die for anything

or anyone. And what a sad selfish world that is. Paul is willing to suffer, for the people of God, for the Savior, because he knows there is meaning there. And that gives him joy.

So much so that he can say in Romans 5: “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Christ suffered for worthless sinners, you and me. And he has made us into something valuable, his beloved people, yet we are unwilling to risk or suffer anything for something so worthwhile as the Gospel message or a brother and sister in Christ? Paul says no, he will gladly suffer. As a husband would give his kidney to a wife in need without hesitation, and be glad to do it, so Paul, so our Lord, are glad to suffer for us.

And it isn’t just Paul. Let us hear from James, the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, who was killed proclaiming the Gospel. From James 1: Consider it all **joy**, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” James finds joy in suffering as well, not just because it is for something worthwhile, a cause or person, but because it also *produces* something worthwhile, something to be commended. Boys compare

scars on the playground for a reason, to show what they have endured. Our Lord Jesus has his scars too, but they are not marks of shame, they are badges of honor – his scars shout out that he is the risen King! May we likewise persevere in the faith, through the wounds of this broken world and our broken bodies, and we will receive honor, indeed, we will receive the crown of life – that’s something worth finding joy in.

We looked at Paul, who suffers for others, and James, who suffers for production. But how about Saint Peter, who was crucified upside down for the Gospel? From 1 Peter 4: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But **rejoice** insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

Peter gives us yet another reason to rejoice in suffering. And it is because when we suffer we are, “sharing in Christ’s sufferings.” I’ve asked this question before but I will once more: Is it good to be like Jesus? Answer seems obvious, right? Of course! So be gentle – like Jesus, stand for the truth – like Jesus, forgive, love others, and so on – like Jesus. Those are all good things because they are things Jesus does, well guess what, Jesus also suffered. And so to suffer is to be like him. And, as we just showed, to be like Jesus is something worth rejoicing in.

So what are these leaders and martyrs of the Church trying to tell us? That suffering isn't the worst thing that can happen to you. And before we say, "that's easy to say when you aren't suffering," let's remember they put their money where their mouths were, in the bruises, lashings, nails, and death. So they aren't just giving lip service.

But neither do we have to lie and say the suffering is fun. Our Lord certainly doesn't. In the beatitudes our Lord blesses the persecuted, those who are reviled, those who mourn, those who thirst for righteousness. Why would he bless the downtrodden and suffering if it was no big deal? No it is. It's hard, it isn't fun. Our Lord knows that, the apostles did too. Paul prays a thorn in his flesh would be removed, and God says "no, it stays." Not a happy outcome, but Paul was not abandoned, God promised him "grace sufficient" to bear that suffering. So in times of suffering, we don't have to be happy about it, but lean on the Lord who has endured suffering too.

Or consider the well-known verse from Matthew 11: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." He acknowledges that it's a yoke, a burden to carry to be his disciple. But compared to what this world has to offer? Look around folks, does *not* following Jesus guarantee you a life free from

heartache and pain? No, it comes for all of us. And what hope, what joy, does the unbeliever have in suffering, in chronic pain? None! “It’s just bad luck, hope the medicine can fix it, hope the alcohol can take the memories away, try to think positive thoughts.” There is no reason to rejoice there! Have you ever been to an atheist’s funeral? It’s depressing. They talk about life lived and now gone forever. They talk about the good they did but gloss over the fact that they were a jerk sometimes. And the tears flow with no hope, no forgiveness... talk about a burden. Not us! Not us! We have a Savior who takes the sins away and promises joy fully realized. John 16: Jesus said, “now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice and no one will take away your joy.”

So we have a Savior who understands suffering, promises us hope in the midst of it, and let us not forget our premise today: The Christian has joy in a God who shares in their suffering. Our Lord does not just understand our suffering in some cognitive way, not at all. Our Lord comes into this broken world. The King of kings empties himself of his omnipotence and dwells in diapers. Our Lord of lords empties himself of his power and gets hungry, tired, sick more than likely. The One who knows all things holds back his tongue as his enemies revile him and mock him. He could have gotten the last word every time, he could have won every debate and shamed each pharisee beyond anything we could imagine. But he says little in his trials. He knows bitter betrayal from friends, he knows tension and

anger with his opponents, he knows depression and fear in the garden, he knows pain – oh, how he knows pain! Cords and metal cut his flesh where he is bound, dizziness and blinding pain as he is punched in the head, puncture wounds of thorns and nails, who knows what trauma he felt under the flagella, the roman whips interlaced with rock and bone. He knows what it is to have to push himself up for each breath while he is humiliated, taunted, dying.

And lest we protest that his suffering only lasted for a couple days or hours, let us not ignore the fact that above and over all such physical pain was the spiritual torment of justice, wrath poured out by his Father as your substitute. That is a pain with an eternal weight that I do believe, if we could begin to comprehend it, would cause us to sweat and shake like no night terror you have ever experienced.

We've talked about Paul, James, Peter, really the list of martyrs could go on and on, but now the Author of Hebrews: Chapter 4: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Our Lord died and rose, victorious over the suffering of the world and he promises to see us through it. Doesn't mean it's fun, doesn't mean it's easy, and you don't have to be happy about it. But even failed administrators, the sick, the sinners, still have hope, meaning, value, and, yes, even a little joy in a Savior. A Savior who

knows what you are feeling, has overcome it, and he isn't just waiting for you at the finish line, he's with you along the way. He is the one who gives us aid through vocations of friends, family, doctors, he is the one who gives us grace sufficient in his Word, his Spirit, to strengthen us, He is the one who walks alongside you to encourage and strengthen and lift up, he is the One who brings us through the valley of the shadow of death, to a glorious, brighter day. So lift up your heads, be of good courage, this is a broken world but we have joy because we know the hardship is worth it for others, for the reward, in that it makes us like Jesus, and that we know, because of Jesus, the suffering will end, but our joy will not. Amen.