

“JOY”

As we continue to socially distance, self-quarantine, care for one another by keeping our distance and wearing protective gear, I have a sense that for some, weariness is setting in.

Having been cooped up for many weeks now, many are suffering in some way as we are held captive by Covid-19, whether it's from anxiety, unemployment, Zoom meeting overload, the inability to hug friends, and perhaps the most difficult of all, grieving those who have died without the comforting rituals of our faith.

Again, I go back to the Psalms, and listen to the words the Psalmist gave his people – words that express not only sorrow, but great joy as well.

Like Psalm 122:1 – “I rejoiced when I heard them say, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”

Or all of Psalm 136 – which expresses unending gratitude for all that God has done.

Or Psalms 145 through 150 – all of which are Psalms of Praise, that the psalmist encourages for his people.

This past weekend should have been our oldest daughter's graduation from the MBA program at Ohio Dominican. We COULD have had a pity fest, bemoaning the cancellation of the ceremony and a great celebration. But we chose, instead to find joy in the situation. We went to the campus and took lovely pictures of her in her cap and gown and hood. We raced a wicked storm across town to get the pictures before the rains came, and we laughed as the winds picked up and the skies darkened. We got some great pictures, and she will have stories to tell that will last a lifetime.

The Epistles are full of exhortations toward joy in the midst of trials.

James 1:2-4 ESV

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Romans 5:3-5 ESV

More than that, 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.

1 Peter 4:13 ESV

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

2 Corinthians 12:10 ESV

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

And perhaps my favorite:

Philippians 4:4 ESV

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice.

As we look at St. Paul's circumstance of his own imprisonment, it's not difficult to relate. He was locked up and in physical chains, unsure if he would be released or executed. Yet this was his message from his prison cell:

When life gets grim, be joyful. He actually spends a good deal of time in his letter to the Philippians making a case for joy as an act of defiance.

In his own suffering, he gives an exhortation that I find amazing in this time of pandemic-fed sorrow, confusion and solitude:

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I will say, rejoice!

Rejoice??? Really??? How does that work, especially as we have pulled away from our neighbors in order to protect them – and us – by slowing the spread and flattening the curve of this virus.

This practice of social distancing presents new challenges of how we have always practiced our faith:

Caring for the sick,

Welcoming the stranger,

Reaching out to the suffering in their darkest hour,

These are at the very heart of my calling.

As a disciple of Jesus, who reached out to heal the most contagious of his day, the lepers, I feel helpless as scores of people die without someone at their bedside.

But much like Paul, we are exactly where God wants us to be.

He was imprisoned over and over, beaten with rods, slandered by his enemies, flogged with lashes five times, stoned almost to death, often deprived of food, water, shelter, and sleep — “in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers” (2 Corinthians 11:26) — and yet always rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10). The chief of prisoners could write from the loneliness, injustice, and distress of his cell, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).

Paul used to seem abnormal and extraordinary, even spectacular. I thought he was an anomaly. Until I began witnessing more and more men and women like him today, braving inconceivable trials — conflict and cancer, betrayal and abandonment, persecution and loss — with surprising joy in God. They prove what we all experience in one way or another. If we look to him when we're thrown into the wilderness of suffering, he will lead us to secret sanctuaries of peace, strength, hope, and even joy.

He uses the words “joy”, “rejoice”, and “be glad” liberally throughout his letters. Paul isn't encouraging Christians to throw a party in response to suffering and hardship, but he is imploring us not to give in to fear.

So, rather than responding with suspicion when someone coughs (It is also allergy season), or terror at the nightly news reports (turn the TV OFF!), or panic shopping at the grocery store (am I buying out of fear or true need?) rather than any of this, Paul asks us to focus on what is true and life-giving.

Here's what he says right after “rejoice”.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” In other words, if you have faith that God is in control, you can be joyful, because you know that you are not alone, even when you are alone as you social distance. “The Lord is near” he promises.

In this time of pandemic and virtual worship, Paul's words are a reminder that the Holy Spirit moves through our lives and all of history.

In fact,

1. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and therefore a character quality that God is growing in us, as disciples of Jesus.
2. Joy is not dependent on the circumstances around us, like happiness is. In fact, difficult circumstances often drive us into deeper dependence on Jesus, who is the source of our joy.

Eternal life is happening NOW. His kingdom, while not yet complete, is here in our midst NOW. God's presence is with us TODAY, in the midst of whatever we may be going through. His joy is our strength IN THE PRESENT (not just “some day”)

3. God shows us through the cross of Christ that the trials and suffering we experience is never wasted. While God isn't the cause of our suffering, he is using it always for our good and his glory.

Examples of how God is at work in this time....

Paul's letter to the Philippians is a reminder that the call to suffering is one of the most counter-cultural things we as Christians do. Suffering, is part of our human experience which often leaves us trying to figure out the meaning of God's will.

Isn't living our lives as an expression of Jesus' ministry supposed to be challenging? It is our faith that gives us the ability to see beauty and hope in any circumstance. "Don't worry about anything," Paul says. "Make your needs known to God".

In other words, name it. Faith. Doubt. Anger. Fear. Frustration. Sorrow.

God can handle it all, and so much more. As long as we are honest in our prayer.

And in response to our prayers, Paul tells us that "God's peace will guard our hearts and minds through Christ." God's peace surpasses all understanding. That is so powerful and comforting, and inspires joy, especially when we are felling alone.

Remember, we are the people of the resurrection. We believe in what others consider impossible. We can trust that God's peace will protect our hearts and minds – and we are free not to worry about how it will happen, because it surpasses all understanding.

Until the day we can be together again, the Lord is "near". God doesn't have to maintain a distance of six feet. His Holy Spirit is in each of us. In that, we can find defiant JOY! Amen!

Prayer

Lord God, we give you thanks for your Word and it's witness to us in times of doubt and confusion, sadness and uncertainty. Remind us that there is JOY through the power of your Holy Spirit, especially when we find it difficult to find it in our worldly woes. Help us to seek your face more fervently, that we may be rooted and grounded in you, our eternal Joy. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

JOY"