

## 9.10.23 – Pentecost 15

### “Joy in Suffering?”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

#### Isaiah 53:2-9 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.  
<sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.  
<sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
<sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.  
<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
<sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.  
<sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

**Leader: These are God’s Words through the Prophet Isaiah!** All: Thanks be to God!

#### 1 Peter 4:12-19 (NIV)

*Suffering for Being a Christian*

<sup>12</sup> Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice inasmuch as

you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. <sup>15</sup> If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

<sup>16</sup> However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. <sup>17</sup> For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? <sup>18</sup> And,

“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

<sup>19</sup> So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

**Leader: These Words of Joyful Suffering Are of God!** All: Thanks be to God!

**Please pray with me:**

Dear Lord, we worship and praise you even in the midst of suffering and rainy days. Sometimes that is harder than at other times, so forgive us when we cannot find joy or feel worried or other negative emotions. We thank you for the recent lessons on healing and ask you to make known a new lesson about suffering. We ask for your mercy, grace, and love. May your voice be the one heard today as you speak through mine. Amen.

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Why is it that some people blame others for whatever happens to them while others just take difficult things in stride? I've been asking people that question and received several interesting opinions. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 53, verse 1 answers that question for me by asking, “to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” As he opens the hearts of certain men and women, I think God chooses who can take that suffering or challenge, and not just **see** God in it but also has the gift and courage to **convey to others** the joy in the difficult situation.

This part of Isaiah takes place when Jerusalem is in exile in Babylon. Judaism teaches that in the familiar Isaiah 53 “Suffering Servant Song,” a remnant of Israel is the suffering servant being put to death in exile but will be restored to fellowship with God later. It is a prophecy of good tidings yet sets the main character (whether it is Israel, a leper, any

servant, or Jesus Christ) in a barren dry land both physically and spiritually. Although “he” is not named, we New Testament Christians read “Jesus” into the Messianic poem. In any case, the “he” was a normal guy, not handsome or rich, and was despised by others (the reason some think it was a disfigured leper and others think it refers to the defeated nation of Israel). This passage is often read at Christmas or Easter because of Verse 5: “he was wounded for our transgressions [*sins*], chastised, bruised, and beaten” – all historically fulfilled during Passion Week. He took our sins upon himself; he was treated harshly, imprisoned, tortured, and buried in a rich man’s tomb. It is no doubt that Jesus suffered on our behalf, yet he never blamed another; he courageously and prophetically accepted his fate as he suffered.

Despite my original question, it is reported that not all, but **most** human beings have a characteristic to accept pain and turn it into something else like a positive life change. From them, we hear sayings like “turn over a new leaf,” or “you can start your day over again at any time,” “when one door closes, open a window,” and “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28),” and many more. A Hasidic saying goes like this: “There are three ways in which a man expresses deep sorrow: The man on the lowest level cries; the man on the second level is silent; and the man on the highest level knows how to **turn his sorrow into song.**” Remember me telling you about a 2019 movie, *The Song of Names*?

Although the punishment he received for our sins was death, if the suffering servant was Jesus, he offers a joyful forgiveness and welcome

to paradise to one thief on the cross simply because he repented and asked to be forgiven. Surely that was a joy-filled act as Christ prepared to meet his own Father in heaven, and meet the thief restored and reborn again in paradise. If the servant was Israel, then after Cyrus defeated Babylon and returned the remnant of Jews to Jerusalem, there must have been joy even in the work of rebuilding the city and temple; we hear the details in Ezra and Nehemiah, and from the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Now, as we transition back from healing to divine experiments, with new responsibilities, pop-up events, remembering the country's losses at 9/11, and heading into the holidays, we do need to strengthen and renew our Christlike attitudes and faith. In our New Testament reading, Peter anticipated hardships for the believers, so he encouraged them to face suffering with a Christlike faith that was recognizable, a blessing, and complete trust. He warned them not to be surprised because suffering happens unexpectedly sometimes, like my own health crisis; and just because we serve a risen Christ, we are **not** exempt. Likewise, we should not be ashamed of being Christ followers, especially if we are in crisis or are persecuted. It is through our Christian attitude, service, and faith that others may hear or see the Gospel lived out. I think of Dolores Puckett, with her sense of humor and favorite hymns, how many people she witnessed to during her cancer battle. Even most criminals have some respect for Christian faith (think of the demons exorcised and how they recognized Jesus!), so the believer should feel a sense of joy and healthy pride no matter the suffering. It will be God's glory not man's endurance that is revealed during suffering; and for that we must praise God's name, understanding that Jesus died for us to be saved from a final death.

Recall the testimonies of September 11<sup>th</sup> responders and survivors; many were not Christian yet saw and still see today God's love and mercy in the acts of heroism and the memorial to them (including the long-term illnesses and sacrifices resulting from those heroic acts). In the context of Peter's writing, Christians were being sought out and persecuted by the Roman government, so he did his best to remind believers of the bigger fight, and the glory that would come through salvation and life eternal.

How can we prepare ourselves to receive joy in unexpected suffering? By restoring and strengthening our relationship with God through Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Scripture. Jesus told his disciples that the poor we would always have with us and in the Sermon on the Mount "blessed are the thirsty and hungry who suffer because they will be filled (Matt 5:6 NIV)". He also said (Matthew 5:10 NIV), "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If we take his words seriously, our suffering has a purpose—to testify. Verse 16 commands us to rejoice in the privilege to serve the Kingdom and to glorify God's name. In plain English, what does that mean? I think it means to be prepared for hardship by surrounding yourself with faithful believers to support you, Scripture memorized for those dark moments, being bathed in prayer, and sharing the joy you discovered through your suffering, especially with those who do not know Jesus. Verse 19 says it plainly, "<sup>19</sup> So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." We must not give up on our bodies, our minds, or souls, but follow the example of Isaiah's suffering servant, adding the pride, eternal joy, and God's revealed glory

taught by Peter following Christ's example. Will you be a blamer for your suffering or a joyful proclaimer of God's glory? Amen? Amen! //

**Please pray with me?** Merciful God, we thank you for this reminder, no matter how hard it is to find your joy and your glory in our suffering. We lay before you our unexpected sorrow or crises and thank you for the joy available each day through salvation and the promise of eternal life. Let us proclaim your name in all we experience both good and bad, for it is in your Son Jesus' name that we pray and dedicate our lives. **Amen.**