

“LIVING ON THE ROAD OF SUFFERING.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; I Peter 4:12-14; Hebrews 12:2

Introduction.

Let me share with you the three roads of suffering the Holy Spirit used to lead me to preach this morning on suffering and joy.

First, there is the road called the season of Lent, a season when people often reflect on Jesus as He walked on that path called the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering that led to the cross.

This led me to reflect on how paths of suffering are another means of grace in our lives like baptism and the Lord's Supper. We have already considered living under the water of baptism and living at the table of our Lord. How can we live on the road of suffering as another one of God's means of grace, when He shows us the glory of His grace in our afflictions?

Second, there is the horrendous suffering going on in Ukraine. I am burdened by the images pouring out of Ukraine. The media bombardment is not good for our souls. Our souls are not meant to carry the weight of that much evil, pain and suffering.

Third, there is the suffering of many people in our flock who are suffering from various trials, physical, mental or emotional. Our prayer list seems longer than usual and the needs seem greater. We buried two of our members this week. I visited members in the hospital. We are praying for at least seven we know about, I am praying for a few others I know about, and then there are those who's suffering is known only to them.

In the sovereign, mysterious and hard providence of God a number of us are going through some significant trials. Rick B. is in a long, very painful battle with cancer. Len H. is far away, facing some daunting challenges as he is not yet able to walk. He talked to me about the spiritual challenge of waiting on the Lord. Dale A. stroke has left him with the frustrating inability to speak.

And the list goes on, John and Karen, John and Jean, Freda, those in our care homes. This is humbling and I feel the burden of this suffering in our midst. So I preach this morning as much to myself as to you. I want us to better understand the glory of the grace of God as it's revealed to us on the road of suffering.

As I started looking up the Scriptures in the NT on suffering, I was struck by something. I wonder if you noticed it as well. There is a word in all those texts and in several others as well, a word that seems out of place, like it doesn't belong there.

The word rejoice or joy. Why in the Bible do we find that word alongside of suffering? It seems like an oxymoron, like a contradiction, a paradox.

Jesus said that in this life you will have affliction, that is a guarantee. So if that is a given, then learning how to find joy in the midst of it seems to me to be a welcome thing. If I have to suffer then, Lord, help me to know this joy and rejoicing in struggles of this life.

The Road of Suffering.

We will use our texts and especially I Peter 4:12-14 as our road map to finding joy on the path of suffering.

Now someone might be thinking, these verses seem to be focused on *persecution*, the kind that comes at us because of our faith in Jesus. Can fiery trials apply more broadly to afflictions, sickness, cancer or some family crisis?

In the case of persecution in the name of Jesus what is the test? The test is whether or not I will continue to honor the name of Jesus and not deny Him or bring reproach on Him, whether or not I will confess His name and trust Him with my life.

Doesn't this same test happen when we get cancer or some sickness or laid off or experience a fire or flood or accident or the death of a spouse or a child? Isn't the question the same, will I honor Jesus, worship Him, trust Him completely, or will I turn against Jesus in anger or frustration or impatience? Will I begin to question whether God is good or even if there is a God?

In either case we are suffering as a Christian when we suffer with faith, hope and love, with prayer and a constant reliance on the Word of God.

Notice we should not be surprised by fiery trials. We should not think something strange is happening to us.

Think it not strange. This is the Apostle Peter being a faithful shepherd and pastor. He is encouraging his flock by warning them not to be caught off guard and falter in their faith.

This is hard for us Americans who are so used to ease and comfort. We expect life to be good and relatively free from troubles. We must kill that expectation, it isn't Biblical.

And notice they aren't just trials but fiery trials. The kind that put us to the severest of tests and rob us of all our earthly comforts and pleasures. There are hard providences from the hand of God that try our souls, test our faith and present to us daunting challenges.

OK, so we should not be surprised by trials, troubles and suffering in this life. Fine. But how do we take the giant leap to rejoice in our sufferings, to count them as joy? Isn't that a bridge too far? How can we have this joy? Let us consider three ways.

Rejoicing on the road of suffering.

First, we have the example of Jesus, the Son of God, as we share His sufferings.

Hebrews 12:2 [Look] 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.

If we are going to walk this path called suffering with joy we need an example, a mentor, a walking partner, someone who has gone before us, and there is none better than Jesus.

He came from the highest height to the most horrible suffering here on earth. He ran the greatest and hardest race and He ran it all the way to the end. He patiently endured the worst pain, the worst shame, the most bitter hostility, always keeping before Him the goal, which was glory and the joy of the Father as He faithfully carried out the Father's will.

As Jesus kept the joy of heaven's glory before Him, so we will find joy in the midst of suffering when we keep Jesus and His glory before us.

I Peter 4:13 Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Hebrews 12:3-4 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Consider Him, think about Him. Take your eyes off yourself and off your suffering, have eyes only for Jesus. Imitate His patient endurance. When you feel yourself getting weary and fainthearted, when you feel like giving up and quitting, look up to the One who endured to the end and to the point of shedding blood. He is with us, He is our strength; joy in the Father's presence is His reward and ours.

Jesus makes joy in the midst of suffering possible. When believers fix their eyes on Him and completely rely on Him for help and support, they can rest assured Jesus is the one bringing their faith to completion, as the author and perfecter of their faith and the giver of joy.

Give up the foolish expectation that somehow this life was supposed to be easy enough to go it on our own, that we could manage in our own wisdom and strength and fortitude. Don't lose sight of Jesus, don't lose sight of where His road leads.

This is so important to remember because as soon as we forget it we will begin to mumber and grumble and complain like the Israelites in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

There was a man who received a letter saying he had received a huge inheritance, a vast estate with vast riches. On his journey to receive it his car broke down about 10 miles away. What is he thinking as he trudges along the road? Is he grumbling about his broken car, or is he thinking about what lies ahead? Fix your eyes on Jesus and the joy set before you.

Second, we have confidence in the hand of God working out His good purposes.

I Peter 4:12 Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you *to test you*.

Do you see what is going on in our trials? These things don't just happen, they aren't bad luck or fate or accidents. **God is a God of tests**, of trials, of furnaces. He tested Adam, later Abraham with his only son, he tested Peter and Paul.

When you are going through any fiery trial, remember God brings them and uses them. God's fire is a refining fire, a testing fire, a purifying fire, a faith strengthening fire.

God is always up to something and God never wastes anything. God is bringing to completion the good work He began, so we "may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

This means trials are the hand of God on us, this is His doing. He is showing us His grace, the proof of how present and great His strength is for us.

Remember the saying, when God seems most absent, that is when He is most present and the cross proves it. The cross is when God did His very best and greatest work. So when we are in the midst of the severest afflictions and most fiery trials, know that God is doing a great work.

The joy is not in the thing being suffered, but in what we know to be the affects, the outcome.

Romans 5:3-4 We *rejoice* in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

James 1:2-4, 12 Consider it all *joy*, my brethren, when you encounter various trials. 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

In the hard providences of God we are receiving and experiencing God's grace, God's love, God's transforming. To say it another way, when you meet affliction see the hand of the living God on your life in that moment. And that is cause for worship, cause for rejoicing.

If trials and afflictions are sent to us by God's Fatherly hand, by someone who loves us with an exceedingly great love then how can I learn to count them as joy and see them as a blessing, as a grace disguised, a sever mercy, a glorious intrusion?

Third, we have the Spirit of Glory and of God.

I Peter 4:14 You are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

We are talking about joy in the midst of suffering. That joy does not come from us, we are not its source. God is the God of joy, joy is a gift from God. Joy is second on the list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit dwells in all believers whether they are suffering or not. So I take this to mean there is a special work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of those who suffer.

To have joy in the midst of some trial or trouble or suffering you have to have the Holy Spirit. Does the Spirit of glory and of God rest upon us, and are we resting on the Spirit of glory and of God?

Romans 5:5 God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

This is essential, only by the Holy Spirit can we know that God loves us. Without the Holy Spirit a human being will only hate God and come to the conclusion that if there is a God He is evil and unjust because of all the troubles that come our way.

By the Son of God and by the hand of God and by the Spirit of God suffering and joy dance together. Joy can coexist in the midst of sadness, fear, doubt, pain and suffering, because God is in the midst.

Conclusion and application.

I know of a pastor who adopted the attitude when he saw a trial or suffering approaching and it knocked on his door, he would open the door and say, "Hello, old friend, come in." He wasn't a masochist, he didn't go looking and he certainly didn't send out invitations, but when it came, he knew another friend had sent it, and if that friend sent it then he would not flinch or run or duck and hide or complain.

He took Romans 8:28 to heart.

Romans 8:28 We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

He took James 1:2 to heart.

Consider it all *joy*, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.

We rejoice in our sufferings for they are an old friend and they have been sent by a friend.

Parents, don't try to build heaven here on earth. Don't try to give your kids a sense that they are living in paradise or in the best of all possible worlds. Some people think Lynden is a little oasis or utopia on earth but we need to burst that bubble.

In this life we will have afflictions and tribulations, hardship and heartache. In this world accidents happen, people get cancer even at a young age, houses burn down, people commit terrible sins against each other, people kill people, sometimes over religion.

Parents should parent with eternity in mind. Parents and grandparents, use our time in I Peter to prepare your children to suffer for Christ. Christ suffered and it isn't strange but normal for Christians in most of the world to suffer. As you teach them what to do in case of fire, teach them what to do in God's refining fire. And why joy is a good and right response.

Let me make an application of this to the war in Ukraine. The news is filling our hearts, minds and souls with the most distressing of news and images. Remember news today is a kind of entertainment, it is meant to sell you, to keep you interested and engrossed. They have to keep ramping everything up, sensationalizing. A bomb hits a maternity hospital, which is a terrible thing, but the news plays it up for days and overwhelming us with images. It borders on voyeuristic.

As Christians all of it is distracting. We should be doing something different with our news intake than what the rest of the world is doing. First, our primary work that we can do from here is pray, pray for the people of Ukraine and of Russia, pray for the leaders involved, and pray for the church in those places. Pray for their joy.

Second, instead of drinking from the fire hydrant of the secular news outlets, we should be using other sources to find out what God is doing in Ukraine and Russia. God is in the midst of this conflict, in the midst of the suffering and affliction, which means He is up to something big. Find out what God is doing and let that be what you feed on and pray about. Find the joy, not what the world is selling. Look at Samaritan's Purse, Operation Mobilization, World Magazine.

One of the Kidstown orphanages in Romania has taken in about 50 refugees. Christians on the borders of Ukraine in Poland, Romania and Moldova are stepping up. Countless churches are offering transportation, shelter, food, and hope. The churches are becoming a sort of underground railway.

Wherever you see trials and troubles, look for God's grace and glory at work in the hearts of His people as He works redemptively in and through all things. Where God is at work there will be a joyful harvest for His glory.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you that because of the glory of your all-sufficient grace in our lives we can say thank you in the midst of everything that goes wrong in our world and in our own lives and bodies. You have given every pain a purpose to the glory of your grace, you have sanctified every suffering that we be more like Christ and our faith more like pure gold. You have carried us in your arms through the fiercest storms. You have never failed us, you are not failing us now and you never will. May everything in our lives continue to be a demonstration of your glory and your grace and may everything in our lives point to Jesus and be a light of hope and comfort to those in affliction.