

Holy Thursday
Thursday, April 9, 2020
Rev. Liz Whitford

Sorrow Will Turn into Joy

¹⁶ “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷ Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying to us, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and ‘Because I am going to the Father’?” ¹⁸ They said, “What does he mean by this ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’? ²⁰ Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²² So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

- John 16:16-24

This isn't the normal Maundy or Holy Thursday text that we normally read. We don't hear or read about Jesus and the Last Supper or the Garden of Gethsemane. Instead we are reading from the Gospel of John, where we hear or read the conversation that ensued during the Last Supper.

Believe it or not, Jesus had four chapters of teaching during the Last Supper, check out chapters 13 through 16.

What speaks more to our currently situation than the teaching by Jesus, “Sorrow will Turn to Joy”. We have never had a Holy Week like this, and I hope that we will not again. Jesus foretells what will soon happen, his death, and frankly the disciples are found speechless, they do not understand. The disciples struggle to understand Jesus often. In this scripture, Jesus slightly explains to them that they will experience sorrow and then joy, which we will look at in a moment. Jesus also explains with yet another parable.

In this parable, he compared the disciples' sorrow turning into joy with a mother giving birth. This is not the first reference to a childbirth metaphor. This reference happens in Isaiah several times, particularly chapters 26 and 66. In these metaphors the childbirth always pointed to the restoration of Jerusalem. It was always about God's relationship with God's people.

What is striking about this parable is that the original Greek words that are used in this parable are strange. For instance, the word translated “pain” is a pain that is emotional not physical. That would mean the mother would have greater emotional pain than physical pain during a delivery of a baby and would later find joy.

Also, when Jesus talks about the women's “anguish” being passed because of the joy, the noun, “thlipsis”, translated as “anguish” is more commonly translated “tribulation.” Would having a baby really be a tribulation, a cause of great suffering? The noun is usually used to describe the suffering and persecution that the community will endure before they experience God's kingdom. It shares with us a glimpse of what the church later faced and what we face before the end of time.

The parable, as you may already see, shares with us several connections. The woman portrays the community as they suffer in order to receive God's coming salvation and new life. Some theologians even believe that with the joy that we end up with there will be no more questions. Questions grow silent as the joy overtakes us.

Jesus also alludes in the very end of our scripture that by asking there will be answered prayers as a sign of the joy because of our relationship with God. In this time of uncertainty, of suffering, of emotional pain, we are brought into a time where we remember that even in this time there is light at the end of the tunnel, there is joy that is coming.

As we look at Jesus' last night with his friends before his death we are reminded that there is fellowship and there is mourning. Joy is coming. Hope is coming, but we have to endure some suffering to be brought to an everlasting joy. Amen.

Love Feast

When we "break bread" together as a church in our worship, we remember that Jesus invited folks to his table as part of his ministry, not just at the Last Supper. So we wanted to create a way for all of us to break bread together with whatever we have at our homes. Indeed, perhaps even comfort food! Please feel free if you haven't done already, to pause this video to grab your comfort food for our love feast.

If you are viewing this on Facebook, I also invite you to share what you are eating in our love feast today.

Jesus used the parable of a great banquet (Matthew 22) to which all people are invited in order to talk about what the "kin-dom" of God, the family of God, looks like. He said, "Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled." He often invited the most unlikely guests to his mealtimes, confounding the disciples. In this way, he was encouraging a deep love and connection beyond social norms. He knew that we humans need connection and inclusion. Jesus comforts us, saying "you have a place at the table" and Jesus challenges us to make sure we are doing the same—that all people know they are welcome in our hearts, in our homes, in our churches— even if we can't physically be with each other right now.

It is difficult in this moment not to be near some of the people we love and might be worried about. Take a moment and say out loud the names of people you wish were right there next to you at your table today.

Jesus is no longer physically on earth, yet every time we gather around a table and we call him to mind, he is present with us in Spirit. And so too, our loved ones are with us. Let this be a comfort to us.

We also want to call to mind, the people we cannot name, whose names we do not know. But we know they need our prayers and God's comfort.

For those who have lost loved ones

For those who are sick and recovering

For those who are caring for loved ones who are sick at home

For those who are caring for persons in medical care

For those who are separated from loved ones

For those who are feeling alone and isolated

For those who are helping and are so very tired

For those who are struggling to find friends, food, and comfort

For those who are afraid

I invite you to take a deep breath on behalf of all those we do not know and cannot call by name.

As we do so, we know that God knows who needs our prayers and the Spirit, Breath of God, is blowing from within us outward as a Spirit of Compassion and Presence.

Jesus asked us to remember him whenever we break bread and raise a cup in thanksgiving. In this feast of love and comfort, we can call to mind things for which we are deeply grateful. I invite you to speak aloud a couple of things that you are grateful for in this moment.

And so I invite you to raise a plate of “something” on your table, or a glass of whatever you are drinking, and let us bless it in this way, repeating after me there at home:

Holy Comforter...
We gather in your name...
invited by Jesus...
bound together with your Spirit...
in union with each other...
Feed our bodies and our spirits...
with your comforting presence...
so that we might be your comfort to others...

Bless this food...
and break open our hearts...
Bless this drink...
and pour out your love...
Amen...

As you enjoy this love feast, I invite you to imagine what extravagant love looks like as you reach across the social distance to loved ones, to friends, and even acquaintances or strangers.

And now may you shelter not only in place, but in peace. May the peace and comfort of Christ be present with you now and forevermore. Amen.