

"Joy Cometh in the 'Mourning'"

Psalm 30

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June 14, 2020

During the ten weeks the church was closed and we self-quarantined, I'd occasionally tune in to watch Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York deliver his regular noon-time coronavirus update- it has become must-see television for persons looking for reliable information on our current medical emergency. Functioning as much as a pastor as a political leader, he continues to remind the citizens of his state just how strong and resilient they ARE. He sounded very much like Churchill with his refrain: "New Yorkers are tough. We have conquered real challenges before and we WILL do it AGAIN!" Because the state was proactive when the coronavirus first broke out, the infection rate there is now falling while spiking in other areas of the country which had responded to it more slowly. Therefore, as of this week, New York has begun cautiously opening up her businesses and public spaces once again.

Yes, Americans, in general, have always been a highly resilient people and, as a nation, we've certainly been through WORSE- just think of the Great Depression followed by the early years of World War II where with all of Europe on the verge of falling to the Nazis, the fate of the entire free world lay in doubt. Think of the aftermath of 9/11 and how we responded with a unity and will to recover we hadn't shown since the end of the Second World War- in the end, we not only survived but we THRIVED. In the SAME way, I'm confident we'll eventually overcome this NEW challenge and will emerge STRONGER and more UNIFIED as a result.

This morning, we look to one of the great songs of thanksgiving for confirmation that God's people are ALSO resilient, that God gives us a reason to be a people of HOPE. As the psalmist says, though weeping may endure for a night, with God's help, sorrow will eventually give way to joy as surely as the night must give way to the morning sun. In our psalm—Psalm 30--the writer gives gratitude to God for his recovery from an illness which nearly killed him. Having been delivered from a life-threatening condition HIMSELF, he can't praise God enough for having saved him. He says of God, "You have drawn me up;" "You have healed me;" "You have lifted up my life;" "You have restored me to life." Though once close to death, God has turned his sorrow into dancing; he has unloosened his mourning clothes and girded him with gladness instead. Having learned the lesson that with faith "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning," the psalmist says he will praise him forever.

Now the word translated as "endure" here in v.5 is the Hebrew word for lodging, for coming in to stay for the night. It is the same word used by Ruth when she says to her mother-in-law Naomi, "Where thou lodgest, I will lodge" and it refers to the Eastern custom of welcoming strangers into one's home for safety and shelter. Because the roadways were so rural and security was non-existent, travel could be quite risky ESPECIALLY for strangers passing through the region. It was not uncommon for travelers to be found beaten, robbed, and left for dead beside the road once the sun had gone down. Therefore, as a security measure, if someone knocked on your door, regardless of how dirty or belligerent, you as the homeowner were obligated to offer that person a bed for the night. However, once morning came, your duty was

completed and the traveler was expected to be on his way again.

In our psalm, the stranger represents sorrow for we are told he is weeping but it just as easily could have been loneliness or fear or depression. Yet, just as the darkness of night must eventually yield to the rising of the morning sun, so must this weeping figure be replaced by a SECOND guest described as joy, representing resurrection and new life. The psalmist is saying that at different times throughout our lives, sorrow will come knocking on our door. Often when we least expect it, we find ourselves greeted with unwanted news: a son or daughter has been arrested for drug possession, a best friend commits suicide, our spouse runs off with our best friend, a parent succumbs after a long bout with cancer, our job with the company is terminated after twenty-five years of faithful service. Just when it seems everything is good, it all suddenly comes crashing down, once again reminding us how perilous and uncertain our lives can be.

Unfortunately, some just don't make sorrow a guest for the evening, they turn it into a LIFE-LONG MARRIAGE. Years ago, I was invited to address a meeting of Compassionate Friends, a support group for parents who have lost a child. I was introduced to the leader of the organization who went on to share with me how she came to found this group. It was after her son passed away and she realized that she didn't have anyone to talk to about it. As she described to me how he died after an extended illness, she began to convulse and shake with sobs that were loud and deep. Finally, I had to ask her how long it had been since her son had passed- was it a year? Two years? "NO," she said- he had died FIFTEEN years before. I couldn't help but suspect that for WHATEVER reason, every meeting had become an opportunity for her to relive his death all over again. I left with the feeling that for all those years, she'd been unable to let go of him, that is, to put the past behind her by releasing him back to God so she could then move on with her life. Fifteen years before, sorrow had knocked at her door and instead of leaving at the first light of dawn, it had become her permanent partner.

EVERY Christian, even the most DEVOUT, has at one time or another struggled with bouts of the most unimaginable sorrow or grief or despair and wondered how or when it would ever end. Accompanying such episodes is a profound sense of loneliness- one which has often led persons of faith to wonder if God can hear them or whether God understands their situation or worse yet, whether God even EXISTS anymore. It is to experience what some mystics like Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross have referred to as "the long dark night of the soul," and it might be similar to what Christ himself felt when he cried out from that cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The fact is that such bouts of spiritual darkness may actually be a POSITIVE thing. They are often part of an ongoing spiritual process which helps to liberate us from those attachments and compulsions that keep us from a deeper and richer experience of God and his grace. For instance, Martin Luther was a Catholic priest who we remember as the Father of the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred years ago, he launched a movement that has gone on to change the world when he defiantly nailed his 95 Theses (or disputes against the Roman Church) on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in Germany. Yet, throughout his life, he descended into severe spiritual anxiety and deep depression. He was terrified that God had turned his back on him. Feeling utterly alone, Luther doubted his own faith, his own mission, and the even the goodness of God- doubts which, because they seemed so blasphemous, drove him even deeper into

despair. His prayers, he felt, met a wall of indifferent silence and as a result his health suffered terribly. Eventually, his despair lifted as he came to realize that such darkness of the spirit was a precondition to truly understanding who God is and how much he loves us. Through it, he was able to see how God strips us of our pride and narrow self-interests that cloud our view of him while helping to teach us total dependence upon him and his promises.

Or how about C.S. Lewis, the most popular Christian author of the 20th century? In the late 1950s, he finally found and married his one true love- an American writer named Joy Davidman Gresham. But four years later, after an agonizing battle with cancer, Joy died. Lewis subsequently went through a period of intense grief which he shared a year after her death in his book *A Grief Observed*. Page after page, he chronicled his pain: “Meanwhile, where is God? When you are happy...if you...turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”

What disturbed Lewis most was not the thought that God did not exist but that God might inflict pain for reasons that weren't entirely positive or even good. However, upon reflection, he decided that the pain he was experiencing had to have SOME redemptive purpose. It seemed to him that without such pain in our lives, we would not be able to hear God properly, that only suffering can produce that kind of self-understanding.

Or consider Mother Teresa- one of the greatest Christian saints of the 20th century. Her service to the poorest of the poor in India was as close an imitation of Christ as ANYBODY. However, after her death, it was revealed through her correspondence that for years, she had undergone a severe and intense dark night that persisted throughout most of her ministry. Her letters reveal that for the last fifty years of her life, she felt no presence of God whatsoever- neither in her heart or in the Eucharist. That sense of the absence of God seems to have started about the same time she began tending to the poor and dying in Calcutta and it almost never abated. Although outwardly cheery and optimistic, inwardly she experienced what she described as intense “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness,” and “torture.” She compared the experience to hell and at one point said it had driven her to doubt the very existence of heaven and even GOD.

This dryness within her soul had not come from any sin or failure on Teresa's part- it was simply the “long dark night” which some of US know all too well. She came to realize that her incessant hunger and crying out for God could not have occurred if God had not ALREADY been in her heart. She came to see that her doubts and spiritual suffering not only allowed her to share more intimately in Christ's redemptive suffering but was also a way in which she could identify more deeply with the sufferings of others in the world- with those who were hungry and naked and homeless and crippled and blind, with those who were unloved and uncared for in society. In time, she came to view the darkness she felt as an integral part of her call to ministry.

The bottom line is that we mustn't DENY sadness when it comes to us, neither must we rush off to the nearest bar or bottle of pills to insulate ourselves from its bitter effects. Instead, God would have us learn to ACCEPT it as a natural part of life, to take it up into our hearts and then creatively use it for the remainder of that night. The grieving process does not have to devastate us but, on the contrary, it can be quite beneficial. Again and again, it has been shown

to open and expand our sympathies as well as allow us to become more sensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of others. Because WE have endured life's stabs and cuts, our hearts become touched and our wills moved to action by the adversity of others. The fact is that if we did not know the pain of sorrow, none of us could ever know the joy that comes with love.

I close my sermon with a personal testimony of how I came to learn that "weeping may endure for a night, but JOY cometh in the morning," not figuratively but LITERALLY. In April, 1975, I was attending college in California when in the middle of the night, I received an abrupt phone call from New Jersey informing me that my father had just died. What a shock to awaken from the land of beautiful dreams to such an awful reality. There was no warning of such a thing- I hadn't even known my father was ill. I remember wanting desperately to crawl back into bed and wake up again sometime later to discover it was all some horrible nightmare. As shock began to set in, I felt myself grow numb all over and immediately began to make preparations for the long trip home. I walked into my housemate's bedroom and woke him up. I asked him to pray with me for strength in the days ahead for both me and my family. Then I asked him to drive me to the airport in San Jose to catch the earliest flight back to the east coast.

Driving through the night, I remember how long the trip to the airport seemed. As I thought about my father, tears welled up in my eyes for I knew nothing could ever bring him back. We arrived at the airport where I secured my ticket and then boarded the plane. It was still dark outside but I could see that daybreak was not too far off. Finally, the wheels of the jet left the tarmac reminding me how in six interminable hours, I would be home again.

As I sat in my seat next to the window, looking out toward the east, I thought of my grieving mother and the rest of my family. I thought of all the friends who would be gathered there at the house. I imagined the scene at the funeral home with my father laid out in a new black suit- scenes you are never prepared for and yet know you will one day have to confront. BUT THEN, I thought of how four months earlier, while I had been home during January break, my father took off every afternoon from work to be with me and how we did something the two of us had never done before- at his suggestion, we assembled a giant jigsaw puzzle together. During the next four weeks, we spent countless hours, not just fitting together small pieces of a puzzle, but putting together the pieces of his life that had been much of a puzzle to me, things I had never known before about him. For instance, I was never aware that as a child in the 1920's, he had developed tuberculosis and had to spend a year in a sanitarium for it. Or how he was forced to stay back two years in grade school- one for the year he had to spend in that sanitarium, and another because, as he explained it, "I was just plain dumb." He was less than two weeks away from his 20th birthday when he finally graduated high school in 1937 and that was because my grandmother told him that he was going to get his high school diploma REGARDLESS of how long it took him. Sitting in my seat at 35,000 feet, I quietly thanked God for that special month with him- it could ONLY have been planned by the Holy Spirit.

As I peered out that window, I thought of how only THE WEEK BEFORE, completely out of the blue, I felt compelled to sit down and write him a long letter telling him what a great dad he was and how much I loved him. Then, how A FEW DAYS LATER, he had called to thank me, saying that my letter was the most beautiful thing he had ever received. He was crying on the other end but he didn't want me to know. That was the last time I would ever speak to

him or hear his voice. And AGAIN I rejoiced and thanked God for allowing me to let him know just how special he was to me before he died.

The sun was now up and it promised to be glorious day over the western skies. In those morning hours over the American continent, as I thought of how God had orchestrated those special moments for me, my heart was suddenly gripped with a deep peace followed by a renewed sense of joy. For I KNEW that God was the one responsible for our month together during Christmas break. And I KNEW that God had moved upon my heart to sit down and write him that letter telling him how much he meant to me. And I KNEW that God loved my father with an everlasting love and that in the days and weeks ahead, God would give our family strength. Above all, I KNEW that my father was safely in God's hands and that one day we would experience a great reunion. My friends, from that moment on, my father's funeral meant that we were no longer going to mourn the dead but rather CELEBRATE RESURRECTION AND NEW LIFE. What is often excused as a metaphor here in Psalm 30 quite LITERALLY came true for me- that weeping had endured for a night but JOY gradually took its place with the rising sun.

Let me conclude by saying that he who had written, "Weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning" ALSO wrote, "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." It was the psalmist's way of saying that ALL of us must confront sorrow at one time or another. However, we do not grieve as many in this world who have no hope- OUR sorrow lasts but for an evening! As the dark of night must eventually give way to the morning dawn, so he who is called "the Light of the World" has promised to deliver us from OUR night- to dispel our sadness, to dry our tears, and to inaugurate a brand new day for us filled with his peace and his joy. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, may you blow the ill winds of fear and despair from our hearts and minds this morning and replace them with the refreshing breeze of your Holy Spirit, the Spirit of HOPE instead. Help us to truly grasp that by thy grace, a new day is INDEED dawning, that a new start is coming, that a new joy is rising in our hearts as surely as the sun rises in the east each and every morning. In Christ's name we pray. Amen and amen.