

OUR JOY IN SUFFERING

HEBREWS 12:2

JONATHAN O. TREBILCO

1st Sunday in Advent – November 29, 2009

St. Francis Church – The Woodlands, TX

It happened on March 5, 1994. A Deputy Sheriff named Lloyd Prescott was teaching a class for police officers in the library in downtown Salt Lake City. As he stepped into the library's hallway during a break, he noticed a gunman herding 18 hostages into the next room. Deputy Prescott took in the situation, and made a split-second decision. He decided to do something about this crime in progress. He decided to slip in among the hostages. He was not wearing his uniform, he was dressed in street clothes, and so he was not recognized as being any different from the other hostages, and he slipped in among them and followed the line into the room, and shut the door. But when the gunman announced the order in which hostages would be executed, Prescott identified himself as a cop. In the scuffle that followed, Prescott fatally shot the armed man with the result that the hostages were released unharmed. This remarkable event is a parable of the Incarnation: God took notice of the terrible plight of the human race, and He became Man; He entered our world, joining those held hostage to sin. But He was not a hostage, and He defeated the one who had held the human race in bondage for so long.

We begin today the season of Advent, the four weeks of contemplation and preparation for the great feast of Christmas, the great festival of the incarnation of the Son of God. This Advent season we are taking the time to ponder one aspect of this, the greatest of miracles, the central event of human history, and the climax of God's dealings with men, when God, in fulfillment of all the promises of the prophets and all the hopes of Israel, *visited* His people, in the absolute sense. The one aspect we wish to

focus on this Advent, is the aspect of suffering. For embedded in all the songs of gladness and promise proclaiming the coming of the Deliverer and salvation He would bring, were strange and terrible prophecies of His suffering. He will be crushed. He will be cut off out of the land of the living. The punishment for our peace will be laid upon Him. Though we have sinned and gone everyone to his own perverse way, the Lord will lay the terrible load upon Him. He will be disfigured and marred beyond recognition.

Christ came to suffer, and through that very suffering, to save. He came to be the sacrifice for sin. He descended into the depths of the human condition, and He bore the load of sin and its consequences on the cross, and triumphed over death in His resurrection. The Scriptures teach, and the Creeds confess, that Jesus Christ is truly God, that in Him and for Him the worlds were made. This Sunday morning, as we do every Sunday morning, we recited a Creed as a profession of faith before Almighty God and this company. The Creed follows a Trinitarian pattern: beginning with the Father, it proceeds to speak of the Son, and concludes with a statement concerning the Holy Spirit. But did you notice that when we recite the Creed, we are not reading a long philosophical dissertation which speculates concerning the essence of God, but rather a statement that describes the *action* God has taken, the *descending* action, the descent of Christ into the world. And it says He was really born, that He really lived as a genuine human being, at a specific time in history. In the words of the St. John the Evangelist, “He became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14).

The Christian writer Madeline L’Engle has said,

The wonder of the Incarnation can only be accepted with awe. Jesus was wholly human, and Jesus was wholly divine. This is something that has baffled philosophers and theologians for two thousand years. Like love, it cannot be explained, it can only be rejoiced in.

L’Engle calls Jesus “God who was human. A most Glorious Impossible!”

Martin Luther said, "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond human understanding." And why did He sink Himself into our flesh? Because He came to save flesh and blood human beings. He became a man to receive the full blow of the curse of death which is the result of sin upon Himself, that through death He might defeat death, that through the suffering upon the cross He might destroy the source of all suffering: sin; that He might usher those who believe in Him into the life eternal.

But sometimes, more subconsciously than consciously, as we ponder this astounding act of the Son of God, we recoil from a faithful comprehension and confession of Who Jesus is. We live in a day in which the deity of Christ is so often called into question or denied outright, and sometimes without even realizing it, we find ourselves embracing the truth of His deity, but falling short of a robust acceptance of the reality of His humanity.

When I was a child, I was fascinated with various superheroes, and I went through phases. There was the Spider-man phase, and the Batman phase. And there was the Superman phase. The thing that I found so fascinating about Superman, was that this nearly omnipotent character, went about as the rather bumbling idiot Clark Kent, pretending he lacked confidence, pretending he wasn't terribly bright, pretending to be a mere man. But underneath the business suit and the stupid-act was the red and blue Superman suit. One day, when I was about 7, we had some friends staying with us, and we all went to visit the historic Fort Snelling near Minneapolis, where we lived at that time. I decided to go, wearing my "street clothes" on top of my makeshift Superman costume. I walked alongside my parents and their friends as we toured the fort, all the while thoroughly enjoying the fact that I was incognito, that no one knew I was really Superman. At last I knew how Clark Kent felt. When we got back in the car, I ripped off my shirt to reveal my true identity to my rather bemused mother who was quite used to such shenanigans.

Now I bring up Superman, because I fear too many Christians think that Jesus was a lot like Superman. Superman is all powerful. He can leap buildings in a single

bound, and fly to the ends of the earth to save a person in distress. Bullets deflect off his skin, and knives break when criminals try to stab him. It's *easy* for Superman. He's not human. He's superior to the human race. He may live *among* mortal men, but he is *not* a man.

Isn't this how we sometimes think of Jesus? Of course He went to the cruel pain of the cross, submitting Himself to its degrading punishment, but then again, He's the Son of God. He suffered, but He didn't *really* suffer, did He? He wasn't really one of *us*. He didn't really experience the pain, the suffering or the frustration of human existence. He didn't really feel it. It didn't really hurt. In effect, He wasn't really human. So that when we read of His endurance in the presence of pain, we tend to dismiss it: "Big deal, He could handle it. It was *easy* for Him."

The Gospels give the lie to this kind of thinking. When we celebrate the feast of Christmas we will again celebrate that Jesus was truly human, and human in the fullest sense, genuinely human with a real physical body, a human soul, a human mind, a real human will. He was born as an infant. He grew to pass through every stage of life from infancy to adulthood. He got hungry and thirsty. After a full day of emotional and physical exertion, He was exhausted and slept. He expressed the full range of human emotions, from the tenderest words spoken to a woman dragged before Him by hostile hypocrites, to the white hot anger which flamed forth when His disciples forbade the children to come to Him for a blessing. He stood before the grave of His friend Lazarus, and He wept at the tragedy of death. You say, "But He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead! He wasn't sad." Yes He was. Tears streamed down His very human face, in the face of tragedy of death.

And after doing nothing but good to help those in most desperate need, He was accused by the religious leaders of His day of being demon possessed. He was betrayed by one of His closest friends, and even called the traitor friend as he stood in the garden to aid in the arrest of Jesus. His own disciples frustrated Him no end by their persistent lack of faith and misplaced priorities. He was hurt. He was disappointed. He was frustrated. He felt the wounds of friend and foe. He knew the piercing pain of being

slapped and spit upon by the very people among whom He had worked so many miracles.

Yes, He was truly human and as a human, possessed of all the human faculties, His suffering was not a fraud. In the words of the great Anglican Priest and poet John Donne, "God clothed himself in vile man's flesh so he might be weak enough to suffer." Or as C.S. Lewis once put it, "[Christ] was so full of life that when He wished to die He had to borrow death from others." He entered fully into the human condition; He descended right down into the darkest hole of degradation, shame, betrayal, physical pain, abandonment, spiritual despair. And it hurt.

In his magisterial book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott speaks bold words about the glory of knowing the God Who became man to suffer for us and sympathize with us:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. . . . In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside His immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross, which symbolizes divine suffering.

So Jesus isn't Superman. He experienced life as a human being. He's been there. But there's another thing that makes Jesus very different from Superman. Superman can't communicate anything to us of his ability. Superman is absolutely unique. He does what he does but never communicates the benefit of his life to others. Superman never unites humans to himself that they might participate in his strength. Superman can fly to your aid, but he cannot endue you with his power. He never promises that we can be like him. But Jesus, because He became truly man, because He entered the stream of the human race, may communicate life to all Who come into union with Him.

Jesus did not come to earth to be unique. By that I mean that He did not come to suffer in hope by Himself but give us no hope, to rise from the dead, the only human to emerge from the tomb, but bring no others with Him into the new state of affairs God intends. He did not come to be the strong Son of God and boast, "Look what I can do!" but offer mankind no assistance. No! Jesus came to be the *Firstborn* of a large family, so that all who are joined to Him may receive all the benefit of His life, His obedience, His sufferings, His resurrection, and His ascension – all which He executed in human flesh.

If Jesus, Who is truly God, suffered as a real human, then how could He endure the horrific suffering to which He quietly submitted? Listen to the exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews as it is written in the twelfth chapter at the second verse:

Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:2)

The Christian Faith knows nothing of the horrible theology that suffering is good in and of itself. The Scriptures know nothing of enduring pain in stoic patience for no purpose and with no hope. The Gospel does not call men to martyrdom, whether spiritual or literal, because death is to be preferred for life. No, Our Lord endured the cross, not

because the cross was good in and of itself, but for one reason, and one reason alone: the **joy** that awaited Him on the other side of the cross. The joy of obeying His Father. The joy of seeing a countless host of humans redeemed, forgiven, transformed. Jesus took delight in finishing what He came to do: taking human beings *with* Him into the splendor of the fierce love that has been shared between the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit from all eternity. That was the goal and His suffering was the means. That was the final joy on which Our Lord focused, and which enabled Him to treat His suffering as temporary and insignificant in comparison with the dawn that would succeed the dark night of His agony.

Do you know what our problem is as *American* Christians? We confuse joy with *happiness*. A number of years ago a Christian man from India visited our shores, and he went throughout the country visiting a variety of different churches here. He listened to the sermons preached in American pulpits, and to the statements made in American churches. He took note of the tone and the content of all that he heard. And his conclusion was this: "You Americans are consumed with being happy!" It was not a major emphasis in the churches of his native land. He was surprised that we in America would interpret the Gospel as a message intended to bring us personal happiness.

The promise to us, and the hope that we have, is not happiness, which is based on constantly changing circumstances, but something far deeper, far richer, and far more real: *joy* in the midst of suffering. What joy can there be for us in the midst of our suffering? Well, the same joy which Jesus held in view, the vision of the end goal which enabled Him to endure the suffering. The writer to the Hebrews does *not* say that Jesus could endure the cross because its agonies did not affect Him. If that were the case, Hebrews 12:2 would never admonish us to imitate Christ's example of endurance when we suffer. The same joy: the joy of the vision of the final product which His suffering would accomplish should be in our view, as it was in His.

For instead of being told that a happy and suffering-free life is ours in Christ, we are told that we will suffer, but that our suffering will be *sanctified*. What do I mean by

that? I mean this: that our suffering will be used by God to shape us, mold us, transform us, and conform us to the image of His Son Jesus Christ. We are told that our sufferings will be beneficial, not because suffering is good, but because our sufferings are united to Christ Who suffered. He has been through it all, and He understands our sorrow, our weakness, our frustration, our pain, our despair. He not only has sympathy, He has empathy. He's been there. And he calls us, to *faith* (absolute surrender to Him); He call us to *hope* (confidence in the outcome even in the midst of the trial); He calls us to *love* (knowing that He has the very best intention in mind). And so we endure in suffering by realizing that joy awaits us on the other side. Our sufferings, because they are sanctified and redeemed by His suffering, will produce good fruit in us. And we shall emerge from this vale of tears to stand on the eternal shore, creatures dripping with love and joy. We shall, in the words of Jesus Himself, be *with Him* where He is, to live and move in the atmosphere of the gracious presence of the triune God Who is love.

The Apostle Paul put it like this. He said that all the suffering we endure in our life, is a "light, momentary affliction." How could he say this? Was he a stranger to suffering? Did he take our pain lightly? Certainly not. Paul was hounded by enemies throughout his ministry. Some of his closest friends and assistants abandoned him when he was arrested. When he tried to share the good news of Jesus Christ to the Jewish people, they sought to kill him. He was stoned. Three times he was tied and flogged as a punishment for preaching the Gospel. He was shipwrecked; he was imprisoned. He was finally flung into a deep, underground dungeon in the city of Rome. At the end, he was beheaded by decree of Caesar. And this Paul weighed our present sufferings against our future joy, and his conclusion was this: "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:18). Our suffering is *light* compared to the weight of the glory that shall follow. Our suffering is *momentary* compared to the permanency of undisturbed joy of eternity.

It is this joy, the certain hope of an eternal weight of glory to which our present suffering contributes, that enables us to endure the suffering of this earthly existence. Jesus endured the horrific suffering of His Passion by focusing on that weight of glory He would win for us. We must fix our eyes on Him, and on that same glory He is working for us and in us.

Florence Chadwick was an American swimmer of the mid-twentieth century, and the first woman ever to swim the English Channel in both directions. In the summer of 1952, she endeavored to swim from Catalina Island to the California coast, a distance of 26 miles. As she swam, she was accompanied by several small boats that remained with her in case of a shark attack, as great white sharks are prolific along that stretch of the Pacific Ocean. After 15 grueling hours of swimming, a thick fog set in, and she could not see anything in front of her. She swam bravely on for another hour, but then she gave up, and asked to be taken aboard one of the boats. Only later did she discover that she had been less than a mile from her goal. "If I could have seen land, she said, I might have made it." Two months later, she made the attempt again. And again a thick fog set in, blocking her view, making it impossible for her to discern the distance to her goal as she drew close to land. But this time, she made it to the coastline, in fact breaking the record for this swim by 2 hours. Later she told reporters, that she succeeded in ignoring the frigid waters of the Pacific, and the fatigue of her body, the pain in her muscles, and the bank of fog that obscured her view, by keeping a mental picture of the shoreline in mind, by visualizing her goal every moment of the swim.

Fix your eyes on Jesus Who suffered. Maintain your focus on the final weight of glory. Run the race of life with endurance. Let the One Who suffered bring you to the place of permanent joy. Amen.