

Sermon: The Holy Way

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 11, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

An apologetic-looking doctor came to a patient with news, “I have bad news and worse news.” The patient steadied himself and replied, “So let’s have it.” “The bad news is that you only have 24 hours to live”, said the doctor. Shocked and in distress, the patient blurted out, “OMG, I can’t imagine what news could be worse than that!” “Well,” replied the doctor, “I forgot to tell you yesterday.”

What do people say about death and taxes, that nothing is certain in life except death and taxes. They are unpleasant and unavoidable facts of life that people simply have to deal with. Well, let me add a third, that is ‘suffering’ and the existence of suffering.

So why am I talking about suffering, you should ask, on this third Sunday of Advent, the Advent of Joy? Because joy is so much different than happiness. Happiness is a natural human response when things are going well. But joy...joy is that sense of glee, of unexpected delight, of awe and bewilderment that wells up from somewhere deep within, even when things are not going well. The path way to joy, in so far as revealed in the Scripture, always, always cut through suffering, like a highway through wilderness.

Take for example, John the Baptist. John was the messenger of God sent before Christ the anointed. He was the prophet of God sent to prepare the way, for the coming of the Lord. He lived in the wilderness of Judea, “*wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey*” (Matthew 3:4). John was a Nazirite, a holy man consecrated to the service of God.

He had an incredible following, people from all over Jerusalem, Judea and the surrounding region were going out to him, to be baptized by him. In the context of 1st century Judea, John was an influencer, an idol, he had gone viral. He even baptized Jesus in the river Jordan, in a most humble way to fulfill all righteousness. When the ministry of Jesus was taking off, and John’s disciples came to complaint about their would-be competitor,

John, in that same humble manner, declared, "*He (meaning Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease.*" (John 3:30).

John the Baptist did everything right, everything that God had asked, everything that would've made God proud, for sending him ahead to pave the way for the Lord. Yet, when we catch up to John in today's reading of Matthew 11, he was distraught. He had spoken against the scandalous affair of Herod, a two-bit king-want-to-be. For that principled action, John was thrown in jail with his life hanging in the balance, and death ever so menacing and approaching. It should be noted that he was beheaded soon afterward.

Why? Why does God turn his gaze away from evil? Why does God permit suffering, especially suffering of the righteous? We could almost hear the agony in John's question that he put to Jesus, through John's own disciples, "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" Asking in essence: Are you the Messiah? Are you the one who is to usher in the Kingdom of God? Are you the avenger who will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense, who is coming to save? Or was I wrong about you?

In response, Jesus replied to them in verse 4-5, "*Go and tell John what you hear and see:*

*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear,
the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.
And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*"

Though not explicitly stated, Jesus was essentially invoking the passage of Isaiah 35, particularly verse 5-6,

*"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."*

Isaiah 35 prophesied about a time of great reversal, not just for the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the speechless, the land itself will be transformed also. "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom*" (v.1), for "*waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert*" (v.6).

The wilderness of particularly the southern part of Judea is not a hospitable land. It is hot, dry, arid, and almost un-livable. When I visited that part of the world a few years ago, I was shocked by the dryness of the land. For someone like me, who was born in sub-tropical island of Taiwan, who grew up in the lush green Canada where water is plentiful, I had a hard time picturing how people could survive in such a hot, dry and arid land, let alone fighting tooth and nail over it. With the advance of global warming, with temperature rising and the planet drying, life on earth, particularly on that part of the world, will become even more harsh.

Yet, I am reminded of a story I once read in *Our Daily Bread*—the story of A. Parnell Bailey who had visited an orange grove during an unusually dry season. The irrigation pump had broken down, and sadly, some of the trees were beginning to die for lack of water.

The man giving the tour then took Bailey to his own orchard where irrigation was functional but used sparingly. He pointed at his trees proudly, "These trees could go without rain for another 2 weeks," he said. "You see, when they were young, I frequently kept water from them. This hardship caused them to send their roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture. Now mine are the deepest-rooted trees in the area. While others are being scorched by the sun, these are finding moisture at a greater depth."

I've always thought of that story as a great metaphor for suffering, as a way to understand why God permits and in some cases induces sufferings of the righteous. It is God's way of building us, toughing us up for the harsher reality ahead. However, that harsher reality of parched land and parched soul is not our end. Our journey does not end in that misery. Just as John was reminded by Jesus, we too are so reminded—a time will come, and is coming like torrential rain when both the land and its people will experience a total transformation, as "*waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert*".

Furthermore, a highway shall be there, and it shall be called **the Holy Way**. Not like the old King's Highway that cuts through the dry wilderness of Israel, Palestine and Jordan, a narrow, winding road which has been the source of so much sorrow, strife, sighing and bloodshed. This **Holy Way of the Lord** will be a straight and wide way through green lush land. This **Holy Way of the Lord** will have one purpose, that is to bring the people of God back to the city of God, to Zion, to the new Jerusalem. Those who travel on it will have no fear, no tears, and will never go astray. Those who

are redeemed by the blood of Christ will travel on it with singing and dancing, and gladness and everlasting joy.

That is the vision of Isaiah, the promise of Christ, of what is ahead of us. Our suffering is only temporary, transitional, but the Holy Way of the Lord will cut right through that wilderness and bring us home to eternal joy.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.