

11 January 2017
Epiphany Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“The Joy in Suffering”

Text: Matthew 2:13-23; 1 Peter 4:12-19

Things in our lives often turn out quite differently than we expect. We think we know what we're doing, but as we walk down the path of life, we quickly find out we didn't know as much as we thought. Twists and turns, hills and valleys, and surprises good and bad come our way.

I think of my father, for example. He was ten years older than my mother and because of that, always thought he would die first. But my mom died first and now, some twelve years later, my father is still here. Far outliving her.

I went to college for computer science, but now stand here before you about as far from that career as possible - as a pastor.

And I'm sure you could add examples from your own life. What you thought, what you expected . . . and how things turned out.

And so it was for Joseph. When he got engaged to Mary, I'm sure he thought things would follow the normal course of events for a couple going to be married. But then there was the pregnancy. And then there was the visit from the angel, telling him that this unexpected twist was not just okay, but good. That it was not of sin and evil, but from God. The trip to Bethlehem was an inconvenience and then Jesus' birth there another twist that had to be dealt with.

But now this too? A terrible, horrible, no good, very bad king wanting to kill the son he has been charged to raise and protect? And not just that, but what would the king do to those trying to protect the child? Working against the king to save the child would surely draw the king's wrath down on Joseph as well.

So now Joseph was a refugee. You've seen the pictures on the news, of refugees fleeing Syria or some other war-torn country. Joseph didn't know he had signed up for this! Things were turning out very differently than he had expected.

But so it has been for God's people all along. The unexpected, yes, because God plans and thinks and acts quite differently than we (Isaiah 55:8-9) - just think of all the stories in the Old Testament with twists and turns and surprising people and events. But also persecution and suffering. As long as there is sin and evil in this world, there will be

conflict that bring persecution and suffering. As long as there is sin and evil in this world, it will rage and fight against Christ and all who bear His name. It started with Cain and Abel, and it will not end until Christ comes again and throws sin and death into the pit of fire from which it will never return (Revelation 20:14).

This reality of suffering and persecution surprises some Christians, but it shouldn't. The prophets wrote about it. We heard from Jeremiah tonight, about *Rachel weeping for her children* and *refusing to be comforted, because they are no more*. Jesus Himself tells His disciples that if they hated Him they will hate them, too (John 15:18-19). And tonight Peter said it as well: *Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you*.

So we shouldn't be surprised.

But something else too: fiery trials don't only come from evil *against* Christians, sometimes they come from your heavenly Father *for* Christians. Those from the evil one are meant to destroy you. Those from your Father are to save you. And from our point of view, from our side of eternity, it's not always so easy to tell the difference.

But Peter doesn't tell us to try to figure it out and react accordingly. He says this: that when the fiery trial comes upon you, *rejoice! Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings*, he says. Rejoice, for if this is from your Father it is meant for your good. If from evil, it is because you belong to Christ and bear His name. And your Father can turn what is meant for evil and use it for good for His children.

We see that with Jesus. Herod meant to kill Jesus, but God used him to fulfill prophecy: *Out of Egypt I called my son*. And we see it with Jesus on the cross. The leaders of the Jews wanted to destroy Jesus, but God used the crucifixion to save the world.

So what are we to do? Well, what Peter said, and, I suspect, what Joseph did: *entrust your soul to a faithful creator while doing good*.

Trust. If you are suffering because of your own sin, repent and trust that the forgiveness of Jesus' is yours. You may still have consequences to bear, but God is not against you. He is here to save you from your sin. And if you are suffering for some other reason or being persecuted for being a Christian or for your Christian beliefs, trust that your Father is able to use that for your good. Remember the examples we have in the Bible of that very thing. Especially the cross. So first of all, trust.

Entrust your soul to a **faithful creator**. He is faithful to all His promises to you. So know those promises. Rely on them. Call God on them. He loves it when His children hold Him to His Word. When *with all boldness and confidence we call on Him as dear children ask their dear father* (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer). We sometimes run our ship of faith aground

when we expect what hasn't been promised. So know His promises. He who created you is He who has redeemed you and He who will save you.

And then finally, entrust your soul to a faithful creator *while doing good*. Just as sin and evil rage and fight against Christ and His Christians, so too do Christians rage and fight - but in a very different way . . . by doing good and forgiving. By returning good for evil, forgiveness for persecution, love for hate. And while that looks weak in the eyes of the world, it takes great strength to do those things - a strength, quite frankly, that we do not have. But a strength that is given to us by the Spirit of God who lives in us.

That is the strength, I think, that took Joseph to Egypt. And it is the strength, I know, that will see you through - whatever fiery trial is happening to you, or will soon. Rejoice when it does, because whether it is from the evil one or your Father, it is because you bear the name of Christ. And that is truly the reason above all reasons to rejoice.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.