

## Fourth Sunday of Easter - Jubilate, April 30, 2023

Readings: Isaiah 40:25-31; 1 Peter 2:11-20; John 16: 16-22

### *Those Who Wait on the Lord Shall Rejoice*

The people of God are pilgrims and sojourners in this world, looking ahead to a destination yet to come (1 Peter 2:11–20). Though we are now children of God, the fullness of what we shall be has not yet been revealed (1 John 3:1–3). We are those who wait on the Lord. *“The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him”* (Lam. 3:25). Jesus tells us that the wait is just a little while. *“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me”* (John 16:16). Though you must experience sorrow for a time, though you must live as strangers in a world that is at enmity with Christ, yet your sorrow will be turned to joy when He returns. *“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength”* (Is. 40:31). The little while of weeping shall be replaced with an eternity of rejoicing in the presence of Christ the crucified and risen Savior. *“And no one will take your joy from you”* (John 16:22).

### Sermon Transcript

We begin in the name of God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I mentioned, the text for this morning's message is from the Epistle reading this morning. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Strange things happen in the world, and I'm sure that you have noticed there was a news report about two motorists who had a head-on collision, and I do mean a head-on collision. It happened in heavy fog near a small town in Germany. The two motorists were guiding their cars at a snails pace near the center of the road in the dense fog. Each of them had their head out of the car window trying to see, and, yes, they were going in opposite directions when they realized they had smacked their heads together. Both the men were hospitalized with severe head injuries. Their cars weren't scratched by the way.

Well, strange things happen, and sometimes these events don't seem quite fair. Actress Helen Hayes used to tell of walking down the Champs-Élysées in Paris with former Broadway star Mary Martin, who was wearing a new designer outfit. A bird came down, went swoosh and made a mess on Mary's expensive outfit. Helen expected Mary to blow her top and said Mary simply said, "For some people, they sing." So that brings us to the theme for today. Sometimes life isn't fair. That's what Mary Martin was saying. For some people, birds sing. For others, they simply make a mess. It isn't fair. We think we ought to have absolute control of our lives, and then comes a little bird and plop, or in the fog we bump heads with our neighbor. Even if you are serving God, life can treat you unfairly.

Philip Yancey, one of the better Christian writers, devoted an entire book to this problem. He called it quite simply, *“Disappointment with God”*. When something grossly unfair happens in our lives, many people blame God. For example, there was an interesting tidbit in The Week magazine. The magazine reports that after a football game, Buffalo Bills receiver Steve Johnson blamed God for letting him drop what would've been a game-winning touchdown pass. And this is what he tweeted after, in capital letters with lots of exclamation points and question marks, "I praise you 24/7!!! And this is how you do me!! You expect me to learn from

this?? How??! I'll never forget this! Ever." It was just a dropped pass, but Steve Johnson unloaded on God. Johnson, of course, is not alone.

In the mid-16th century, a group of 50 Spanish nuns led by Sister Theresa Avila, traveled on foot to a neighboring convent in a rugged storm. Crossing a rickety bridge over a swollen stream, the sisters prayed that the bridge would hold up until they were safely across. It didn't. Near the center it collapsed, spilling all the nuns into the water. As they managed to swim safely to the shore, Sister Teresa raised her eyes toward heaven and said, "Lord, if this is the way You treat your friends, it is little wonder You have so many foes." Well, Sister Teresa was known for her wit and a sense of humor. She was actually having a little fun with this incident. She was later sainted by the Catholic Church, but she also knew that the God in whom she believed didn't prevent bad things from happening to good people. And we've all been there. Not with a dropped pass, perhaps, or a collapsed bridge, but there has been some time in our lives when we, too, have felt that life has treated us unfairly, and we, too, have blamed God.

Philip Yancey studied this problem at great length, and this is what he found. Some people caved in when they felt God let them down, while others used their time at adversity as a steppingstone to a richer, fuller relationship with God. And I was especially impressed by Yancey's description of a man named Douglas. Yancey says that when he got to the portion of *"Disappointment with God"* that dealt with the Book of Job, he decided to look around and find the person he knew who was most like Job. He found such a person. This man, he felt, was a righteous man in the same sense that Job was righteous. This man named Douglas was a good man. He had been trained as a psychotherapist, but he gave up his lucrative practice working primarily with the rich and well connected and started to work with the inner-city poor people. And most of us would agree that this was a noble endeavor. Yet after he did this, his life began to fall apart. The first thing that happened was that his wife came down with breast cancer. She started taking chemotherapy treatments, and that affected her whole family. She was always tired and often felt sick, and Douglas had to pick up a lot of work around the house. That spot of cancer spread and appeared on her lungs. His wife was seriously threatened, and a new series of treatments started. Douglas had to deal with that new situation. Then, on top of this, his family was involved in a serious traffic accident. A driver crossed the median and smashed into their car head-on. Douglas' 12-year-old daughter went through the windshield and was badly lacerated in her face. His wife was also hurt. The worst injuries were Douglas himself. Douglas hit his head on the dashboard. First, he had trouble with his vision. One of his eyes wouldn't cooperate, and he saw double. He couldn't even walk down a set of stairs without stumbling. The worst thing to him was that he could no longer read, and Douglas loved to read.

Well, Yancey knew Douglas. He knew his story. So when he started to write about the Book of Job, he decided to interview Douglas. He called him up and scheduled an appointment, they met for breakfast. Douglas told him some of the story and they sat and chatted a while. And as breakfast was served, Yancey said, "Well, Douglas, I'm writing a book about disappointment with God, and I thought of all the people I knew who have the right to be disappointed with God, you're right at the top of my list. So tell me, what would you say to people who are disappointed with God?" Douglas thought for a minute and stroked his beard, and finally he looked at Yancey and said, "You know, Philip, I don't think I've ever been disappointed with God."

Well, this shocked Yancey. He was amazed. He had specifically chosen Douglas because he thought of all the people he knew, he was one of the most likely to be disappointed, even angry at God because of the unfairness he had seen. And Yancey asked, "How can this be?" And Douglas said, "You know, Philip, I learned a

long time ago, and especially through this accident, not to confuse God with life. Is life unfair? You bet. My life has been unfair. What happened to my wife, what happened to my daughter, what happened to me, it's unfair. But I think God feels exactly the same way. I think He is grieved and hurt by what that drunk driver did as much as I am. Don't confuse God with life," he said. "As I read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, I noticed that those people were able to separate the physical reality of their lives from the spiritual reality of their relationship with God." Yancey says as they sat there together, they went through some of the people of the Bible. They turned to a passage, for example, in Ezekiel where God tells about three of his most favorite people, Daniel, Noah, and Job. Think about those three people. One of them spent the night with a bunch of lions. One of them lived through a huge flood that killed thousands of people. And then, of course, there's Job, the greatest example of unfairness in the Bible. Yet when God looks at those people, He says, "These three are my favorites." All three of them, Daniel, Noah, Job, and many others, including Abraham, David, and et cetera, they learned to have a relationship with God that didn't depend on how healthy they were or how well their lives were going.

Yancey says he and Douglas sat there together going through many of these stories in the Bible, and suddenly Douglas glanced down at his watch and said, "I've got to go. I'll leave you with this one last thought, and that's this. If you're ever tempted to confuse God with life, go back and read the story of Jesus, the story of God on earth, and ask yourself how Jesus would've answered the question is life unfair?" And just before he left, Douglas said, "For me, the cross of Christ demolished for all time the idea that life is supposed to be fair." I said, "Whoa. All I can say to that is that I hope when you and I are treated unfairly in life, we can have both the wisdom and the faith in God that Douglas has." Just because you are seeking to do the right thing doesn't mean that life will treat you fairly. Indeed, you can be treated unfairly simply and solely because you are doing the right thing.

In the letter from 1 Peter, we read these words, "For this is a gracious thing. When mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God." The implication is that you can suffer ill because you are doing wrong, and you can suffer ill because you're doing right. Life happens. As Douglas had learned, we must separate life from God. Life can treat us unfairly. God only seeks that which is good for us. God wasn't trying to teach Steve Johnson a lesson when he dropped that pass. Steve made a miscue. He dropped a pass. It may have been simply bad luck or bad hands, but it wasn't God's fault. However, God can help Steve put that mishap into perspective and help him to be a more mature Christian, maybe even a mature believer like Douglas.

Douglas was right about one thing. The best example that life isn't fair is the crucifixion of Christ. 1 Peter continues in Verse 21, "For to this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His steps." So that brings us to the good news for today. We live on the other side of Easter. Resurrection faith is about living faithfully in an unfair world. Christ conquered death, and what does that mean for us? Two things. First of all, when life treats you unfairly focus on God's promises. Remember particularly these words of Scripture, "And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose." God doesn't cause bad things to happen to us, but God can take everything that happens and use it for our good.

Consider what goes into the making of biscuits. The flour itself doesn't taste good. Neither does the baking soda, nor the shortening, nor the other ingredients. However, when you mix them all together, put them in

the oven, they come out just right. That's the first thing. Trust that God can use all things for our good. In the second place, look for ways an unfair event can be turned into something beneficial.

Dr. Ray Pritchard tells about a friend of his named Jim Warren, who was the longtime host of Primetime America on the Moody Broadcasting Network. Warren passed along this bit of advice to Pritchard. "Ray, when hard times come, be a student, not a victim." The more Pritchard pondered those simple words, the more profound they seemed. Many people, he says, are professional victims, always talking about how unfair life is. A victim says, "Why did this happen to me?" A student says, "I don't care why it happened. I want to learn what God is trying to teach me." A victim looks at everyone else and cries out, "Life isn't fair." A student looks at life and says, "What happened to me could have happened to anybody." A victim feels so sorry for himself that he has no time for others. A student focuses on helping others so that he has no time to feel sorry for himself. A victim begs God to remove the problem so his life can be happy. A student has learned through the problems of life that God alone is the source of all true happiness.

And I pray you take that to heart. Be a student, not a victim. Look for ways an unfair event can be turned into something beneficial. Turn your mess into a ministry. Life can be unfair, but don't confuse life with God. Trust in God's promises. Look for ways you can turn a mess into a ministry. And the most unfair act in history was the crucifixion when the innocent Son of God was slain, but we live on the other side of the resurrection. We live by grace through faith. We can see God's power over life's unfairness. God can help us deal with the unfair events that happen to us. Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.