

The Third Sunday of Advent: John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; Psalm 126
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I've told y'all a number of stories about my friend Donnie down in Little Rock. Donnie's the man who seemed like he'd gotten all the strokes of bad luck a person could have and then some. He was homeless most of the time, had all sorts of mental and physical health issues, dealt with addiction, and saw things most of us, mercifully, don't. But I don't think I've ever told you about his partner, Fred. Fred is one of the sweetest and most patient human beings I've ever met. I mean, he put up with Donnie, which already earns him the title of "Saint." He's a veteran, and he uses his VA benefits, not exactly legally, to get Donnie the meds he needs to stay evened out. He's patient and kind and loving and cares so deeply for his partner. I remember sitting in my office, holding Fred's hand as he cried when Donnie went missing, or worse, when Donnie got enough panhandling money for a fifth of whiskey. We'd sit there and weep and worry and, usually at his prompting, we'd pray. Fred could pray with the best of 'em, but his go to was the Lord's Prayer. This was almost always the way into a much longer prayer he'd make up on the spot, like a doorway from whatever was happening now into some reservoir of hope he carried with him in his beat up, desert drab backpack. Fred would say that same prayer, the Lord's Prayer, in my office just as beautifully as he would walking down the sidewalk on a hot day or in his tent on a downpour of a night. It always kept him safe, he said, and on more than one occasion, it served as a sort of compass. No, that's not entirely right. Not a sort of compass. An actual compass. One time, Donnie got arrested and was taken to a jail he'd never been to before. Fred knew he'd been picked up and knew the name of the place he'd been taken to, but he had no idea how to get there. So he just started walking. Everytime he came to a choice, a fork in the road or a busy intersection or even a doubt of "am I even going the right way?" he'd pray the Lord's Prayer, and then follow whatever direction God pointed his gut. After hours of walking like this, as you might imagine, he began to question whether or not he was headed where he hoped he was headed. He was out of the city by now, on some narrow two-lane with tree branches touching overhead. Surely Donnie wouldn't be way out here. So he prayed again, "Our Father" and so on. And his gut said to keep going, so he did, and not half-a-mile farther down that old highway, he saw towering chain link and razor wire and knew he'd made it to the right place. Now I know that's not your typical happy ending, but for Fred, it was like gold at the end of a rainbow, and he prayed again to give thanks.

Here's the thing about Fred -- and Donnie, both of 'em. They know suffering more than most of us. They get jaded about this whole religion thing, of course, and they've seen more of humanity than any of us would want to, but they remain faithful. Donnie used to say he loved coming to church because of the liturgy. No matter what voices he heard in his head, no matter what awful thing someone had done to him the day before, no matter what state he was in, the church was there, the liturgy was there, and God was there, unchanged and open-armed. Fred felt the same, though he didn't need a pew to get to that place. As long as he had the words of the Lord's Prayer, he could take whatever life or Donnie had thrown at him, and find God and know that he was heard. What I've always loved about these two, is that when they pray, at least, when they prayed with me, they almost never prayed for their suffering to end. Fred would pray that for Donnie, but he never asked for his own weight to be lifted, just for his partner's. He'd pray that God would know what he was going through, but he never asked not to go through it.

See, there's this misconception floating around a lot of people of faith, and not just in the Christian world, either. It's this idea that, if you've found religion, then you must be on the path to a happy life totally free from suffering. Which sounds kinda great, but also denies the reality of our world and even our scriptures. Isaiah's preaching to a people that have suffered as much as anyone, exiled and in captivity in Babylon after a horrendous defeat. He says it's time to bring good news to those captives, but he doesn't say he's there to make them think they aren't suffering. Comfort those who mourn, provide for them, share the things that make you

glad and invite them to come along with you, but know they're still hurting. The Psalm names this hope and this reality, too: one day we won't have to endure anymore. One day we'll be like those who dream. One day. But for now, we endure. Paul, too, goes there. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing he says. And do so in all circumstances. Yes, he asks you to rejoice, but he also knows he asks this of people in all sorts of situations. Yes, you are suffering; yes, you have lost; yes, you hurt. And that's ok. If you can find joy, find it in this: that God wants to hear your prayers, even your prayers from that place of pain. When the Pharisees ask John on the banks of the Jordan "who do you think you are," he quotes Isaiah. He says he is the voice crying out in the wilderness, the one clearing the way for the Christ that will come. The voice making way for the Lord in the desolation of the wild, where suffering and the absence of all things life-giving is all too real. That same passage he quotes says that in that place, even the youths will be weary. There's no getting away from the reality of that place, the reality of this life. There's a way made for the Messiah, but that way is not an easy one and it's not in an easy place.

Now, I know this is not the most "happiest" of sermons I've ever preached, certainly not on the Third Sunday of Advent. Today's sometimes called "Gaudete Sunday." "Gaudete" means "rejoice," and if you've got a rose-colored candle on your Advent Wreath, today'd be the day to light it. Gaudete Sunday usually is a breather during this otherwise penitential season, a time to blow off some penitential steam and rejoice for a bit because "OMG, y'all, Christmas is coming!" But this year, maybe it seems to hold a different feeling. Maybe this Gaudete Sunday is less about rejoicing. The whole world is in this weird place where Christmas doesn't feel real and we don't even know how it's December all of a sudden. The whole world is trying to put on a happy face while behind that mask, we all know things are different from what they should be. So maybe this year, it's less about rejoicing and more about giving us permission to feel all the things we're feeling right now, a Sunday not to fake it and instead to live it as we are, with all the heaviness we carry this year. Maybe this is the Sunday not to rejoice because we're just so darn happy, but to rejoice because here, before God, we can honestly name where we are, in a very, very difficult year. No, we aren't in exile like those exiled in Babylon. We have Zoom to get us through our separation from those places and people we love and Netflix to keep our minds busy. But we are in the midst of a world-wide season of fear and great loss. So maybe Gaudete Sunday this year is an invitation to let ourselves feel the things we're really feeling.

I don't know if y'all have ever heard of this, but there are some churches that do what's called a "Blue Christmas" service, sometime between now and the 25th. It's meant to be a chance for those who aren't super happy to bring their sadness to the church apart from those who are so obnoxiously joyful. And I get it, I really do, but I've never been a big fan. For one thing, it splinters the Body of Christ, taking one group and setting them aside, apart from another. It hides away pain and suffering, almost makes it shameful, and while those who mourn come Christmas have their mourning sorta valued, the cluelessly happy never see the pain their neighbors carry, and that's a grave loss for everyone. But for another, our story, the Christmas story, is not a story of pure happiness, and for us to pretend it is by removing those who are in pain now from the assembly so the rest of us can get on with celebrating, doing that denies the pain in the original story itself.

Jesus will be born into our world, and that's absolutely a thing to celebrate, but he is born into a world full of cruelty and oppression. His family is out of place. Conquered by a foreign king that makes them travel in the most delicate of times just so he can find out how many subjects he has. Too poor to be given a place of honor even when the inns are full. Tossed out back with the sheep. Born in a stable, a phrase that sounds romantic these days, but anyone who has spent time in a stable knows the truth of that messy situation. Hunted from the time he is born, fleeing persecution to the land his ancestors were enslaved in, returning home only when the threat has passed and all the children in his generation have been murdered by the mechanisms of that foreign king. And we know where his story will lead. 9 months ago, we held our last service in-person during

Lent, anticipating then the awful fate Jesus will suffer come Calvary. All that suffering, that's not what we celebrate at Christmas. It's not what we look forward to. But it is part of the story. That's not unique to Blue Christmas. That's just Christmas. We celebrate the birth of our savior, but we do it honestly. In him lies our hope that one day all this suffering will end. But in the meantime, that anguish, that pain, those "when's the dang vaccine finally gonna get to Hamilton" doldrums, that's the suffering so important to our story that Christ comes into it in the first place.

To those of you suffering this year, grieving the loss of the ones you love, missing the traditions you've held dear, fearing for the results of a test, worrying over the state of our nation, any of that on top of all the other ways we suffer in a normal year, for all of you who suffer, know this: there is a place for you in the Body of Christ. Your job is not to pretend to be happy when you're not. Your job is to be here, to share your pain with us so that we can carry it together, to bring yourself honestly to the stable when Christ comes and lay your pain by his precious head like so much gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Your job is to bring yourself, truthfully, honestly, and faithfully to God. And the rest of us? The rest of us go there with you. For one, we do this as a body, so those who can help you carry what you bear will do so, but also, if we're all honest with ourselves, even the most joyful among us carry some sorrow, especially this year, so we all go together, for we all have some sorrow to share.

But I want to be clear, lest we find ourselves in the world of the auto-flagellates, suffering is not the point of what we do. We aren't required to suffer, we don't glorify it, we don't seek it out. We just name it as a real part of our lives, as real as joy and sometimes as fleeting. That's what we're about every year, and thank God we've had so many years of practice before this one hit. Because we need to know the joy that comes with others sharing all the things our lives bring us, pain and loss and happiness and health and illness and community. Year over year, we share those things. Like Fred praying in search of Donnie, like all y'all sitting through weddings and baptisms and funerals, like Joseph walking alongside Mary full of joy and worry and discomfort on the way to Bethlehem, we share what it means to have life. Our joy is not without blemish, and it's not always the same thing as happiness. Our joy is in the knowledge that, no matter where we are, no matter what the world has given us, no matter what we have lost, this community is there for you. God is there for you. And soon, Christ, too, will be there for you, unchanged and open-armed.