

It Doesn't Seem Like a Party Now

THE 19th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 23a

October 15, 2017

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-13

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. ¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

God portrays his gift of salvation for us as a banquet—it's an ongoing wedding feast. It's a party. For what else do you call a feast with all the best food, with excellent wine poured out freely with no end? This imagery of the people gathered to a wedding feast, raising toasts of the best wine, and rejoicing with each other over the Groom and his Bride is replete throughout Holy Scripture. Isaiah 25:6:

⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

To this ongoing feast, the Lord gathers his redeemed; he removes the blanket of shame covering all peoples, he takes up the shroud of death smothering the sinner, he covers them in honor and embraces them with life, he wipes away every tear. They look at him and they say,

"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

This is the joyous party of a great wedding. The Apostle John describes it as the feast of the Lamb:

The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready... And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

[Revelation 19:9]

Gone is the sin, washed away in the blood of the Lamb. Gone is the shame, pulled back off the sinner like a cheap blanket. Gone is the shroud of death, swallowed up in the resurrection of the Groom, Christ Jesus. The Church dwells with her Groom—he is her Lord, he is with the redeemed, and all voices rejoice.

So Paul writes a word of rejoicing to the Church in Philippi,

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

[Philippians 4:5]

The Lord is at hand, says Paul. That's why you rejoice. The Lord is near to you, with you, says Paul, that's why you need not be anxious.

But it doesn't seem that way. The Lord is near to you and me? Where is he when it goes wrong? When it goes terribly wrong, is this the comfort, *The Lord is with you?*

Is he with you when you've been caught cheating in school? With you when your boss says it looks like lay-offs coming up at the end of the quarter? With you when the doctor says we need to take a look at your X-rays? Is he with the husband not knowing how to speak kindly with his wife, with the wife crying over a family falling apart? Where's the party, the table set with the best food, the abundant fine wine, the faces dried of every tear? It hardly seems like a party now.

So, when someone is suffering, is hit with tragedy, how do we talk about God with them? How are we speak of God's comfort and his gift of life, when it is not at all clear that God is with us, or if he is with us, it's well hidden?

Families flooded in Houston, and we tell them, "God is in control?" Homes destroyed by hurricane in Florida, God is in control? Puerto Rico with no electricity, God is in control? Homes burned to ashes in northern California, God is in control?

Is that supposed to be good news, that God is in control? Why would it not as likely be bad news? For if God is in control, and he burns down your house, or floods your street, then how goes it with you and God?

There's a problem with looking at God's sovereignty, his power and control—you will, at the end of the day, end up with only a god of judgment and the sinner condemned.

But did God burn people out of their homes because those Californians sinned? Did he hit Houston with hurricane, and Florida, and Puerto Rico because they were worse sinners? How are we to speak of a sovereign God on the one hand and destroyed lives on the other?

When Jesus spoke of the tragedy at the Tower of Siloam where eighteen men died, Jesus ruled out any talk of how the falling tower was God's retribution. Luke 13:4:

"Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell,"

said Jesus,

"and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

The tower of Siloam, it was not God's judgment against those who died. God's judgement is the cross. Jesus took their sin up in his own body and put it to death on the cross. To place God's judgment anywhere else is to rob the cross of its redemption.

The burned homes in California, it is not God's judgment against those now looking at the ashes. To say that would be to say that Jesus did not fully atone for all sin at the cross.

Those in Houston looking to rebuild, in Florida mourning the death of a loved one, in Puerto Rico trying

to find electricity, it is not God's judgment against them for their sin, for Jesus took their sin, he claimed it himself, in order to wipe it out in his own death on the cross.

Those mourning in Vegas, were their loved ones somehow worse sinners? Not if Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and if Jesus is he who took all sin upon himself, and was judged guilty on our behalf, in order to justify the sinner before his Father.

Then, if the Houston flood is not God's judgment against them, and the California fires are not divine retribution to make them pay, if we can't find God in this picture according to his sovereignty and judgment, then where will we find God in all of this? Where will find him in those mortuaries in Las Vegas?

Rejoice in the Lord always,

says Paul,

again I will say, rejoice ... The Lord is at hand.

That's where we find God in tragedy—at hand, near us, with us, bound to us, suffering with us. Can we say that about God? He suffers with us? As if he's a man, as if he's vulnerable, and has human feelings? As if he loves us so much he cannot be apart from us, and when we suffer, he is right there, bound to us, undergoing it with us?

That's where God is found—with those mourning in Vegas. For he loves them, has taken their sin from them and crucified it in his own body on the cross, and would come to them in his Word of Gospel, of all sins forgiven, his word of the life of the resurrection bestowed even in the midst of the worst evil.

He is with those in Puerto Rico. Their pain in finding clean water, in hoping for good medicine, he is with them in that pain, coming to them in his Word.

There are no kinder words, no words more given to bestow hope, to bring life in the midst of death, peace in the midst of fear, than the words, *The Lord is with you, the Lord of life is near to you, the Lord of grace binds himself to you in his Word, your pain is his pain, and he is one with you in all things.*

There are no words more kind than these, because, the Lord who is with you is the Lord who knows your sin, has taken it upon himself and put it to death in his own body on the cross; he is the Lord who knows your pain, but does not depart you, but dwells with you in the promise of Baptism; the Lord who is near to you and with you is he who made you one with himself, uniting you in Baptism to both his death on the cross and to his resurrection from the tomb.

He is with you now in your suffering while you live in your body of sin. He is with you eternally at the banquet, at the ongoing party of wine and rejoicing, in your resurrected body living in eternity alongside him in his resurrected body.

The Lord is with you and me, with our children, even while we live in our bodies of sin.

While we yet live in our bodies of sin, we will suffer tragedy—and when we don't suffer it ourselves, we will see it in the faces of others, just as those many disciples of his could see the pain of the families who lost loved ones at the falling of the Tower of Siloam. We will know the pain, we will feel the hopelessness of a world spinning out of control, we will be hit full bore with the vanity and emptiness of a fallen world, but we belong to the ongoing feast of the Groom and his Bride, to the eternal party supplied by God with the best food, the best wine, and the eternal rejoicing of those who belong to him.

While we live in this life of our sinful flesh, we do it knowing that our Lord is with us, he has made himself one with us, and no affliction comes to us that he is not with us in it all.

So, we live every day not trying to figure out the hiddenness of God and guess why a certain tragedy hit Puerto Rico or Las Vegas, but we live every day in repentance—in contrition and sorrow for our sin, in faith and joy for his forgiveness and cleansing.

Because, we belong to the Lord of life, the Lord who gathers us to his feast, the Lord who loves to hear our rejoicing.

When Jesus spoke his parable of the wedding feast for the king's son, and how those invited to the table were those with no worthiness of their own but who were gathered up from the highways and byways, he also spoke of the man cast out of the wedding feast. He was not wearing the wedding garment. So

he had to go.

But what is this wedding garment that some poor guy gathered up from the byways would be expected to wear? It's not as though the guy would've had an account at the tuxedo shop. The wedding garment for the king's feast, the only garment the poor man would've needed, is repentance. *Unless you repent, Jesus said to those concerned about the death brought to the victims of the Tower of Siloam, unless you repent, you will likewise perish.* [Luke 13:5]

To live in a world of sin, in a world of flood and fire and violence, this does not bring eternal death to the sinner. For the God of life is with him in all the pain.

To turn from the gift of grace, to refuse repentance, to treat the wedding banquet as if it were not the feast of forgiveness and life, this is death, for it is the refusal of the invitation of the Lord of life.

But to hear his word of forgiveness, to hold onto his grace, knowing that you are saved only by grace, to rejoice in knowing that the God of all life has bound himself to you in Baptism and is with you in all things, this is life—it is life at the ongoing banquet, it is to be seated at the eternal party supplied by God. It is to rejoice in knowing that the Lord is with you in all things.

Rejoice,

says Paul,

Rejoice in the Lord always, ... The Lord is near; ⁶ be anxious about nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.