

Let's Celebrate Jesus Even In The Tough Times

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46-55

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How do we celebrate Jesus in the tough times? It is difficult for many. Why? Because of loneliness, death of a loved one, economic hardship, family or marriage crisis. I was at a meeting at one of our hospitals recently and heard a chaplain pray, "Lord, our halls are decked alright. With coughing, sneezing and pain." I heard Bill Hybels say in a sermon that the Christmas holidays have an intensifying effect. The highs are higher and the lows are lower. Recently, in one 24-hour period of time recently, this is what I encountered. One person was waiting on the doctor's report of test results. Another couple were in the labor and delivery room, awaiting a baby. Someone else emailed me, waiting to hear back from a potential employer, did he get the job? And another dad talked with me, praying his daughter would come back to the Lord. They were all in pain. They were all waiting.

So how do we celebrate God's coming, even in the tough times? Two people will help us with this question. First, let's hear Isaiah's take on this topic. The time was 700 years before Christ was even born. Ancient Judah was getting beaten up by foreign enemies, mistreated and ignored. Do you ever feel that way? They needed an infusion of hope and courage. Do you ever need that? In fact, the time was so desolate that the controlling image in Isaiah's words is the image of desert. Barren wasteland, parched, forbidding and hot. But because it was difficult to traverse, it also represented separation, being cut off.

So perhaps where Isaiah began is the place we should also--acknowledging the pain and loss, grieving. During the holidays, we need to name the pain and say why we are having a tough time. A Jewish proverb says, "What soap does for the body, tears do for the soul." We need to cry and acknowledge loss. So we see that grief and joy are not mutually exclusive. We may grieve in the midst of joy and be joyous in the midst of grief.

But let's go back to the image of the desert. As Diana Butler Bass points out, when you look closely at a desert, there is much more going on there than you at first think. Life, growth, activity. But you have to look for it! It's OK to struggle, doubt and at times despair. Just don't let that struggle, doubt and despair have the last word! NOW LISTEN TO ISAIAH'S WORDS (read the text: Isaiah 35:1-10).

But I said there were two people who would bear witness to us this morning about how to celebrate Jesus in the tough times. We just heard from Isaiah. The other one is Mary. Now think about it. A young girl, pregnant, unmarried, frightened. And that messy situation makes her words all the more amazing. How do we celebrate Jesus in the tough times? LET'S LISTEN IN TO HER WORDS IN LUKE (read Luke 1:46-55). Note that Mary does not dwell on her own smallness, but on

God's greatness. That's why we call this The Magnificat, from the first word in the Latin text, "My soul magnifies (makes great) the Lord..."

If we're honest with ourselves, we would admit that we waste some of our pain. We don't learn from it or grow closer to the Lord through it. It's so easy for us to dwell on what has been taken away instead of what remains. It's so easy for us to focus on what we don't have anymore and miss what we have. To grow bitter and resentful. To obsess over what we cannot control instead of what we can (our attitude, our openness to the Lord).

And what specifically did Mary celebrate about God? Verse 50: God's mercy. He cares. Verse 51: God's strength: God can do something about it! God's mercy and strength! Don't underestimate God's caring and power to fix things in your life and in the world. Years ago audiences loved the humor of George Burns and his wife Gracie Allen. She always pretended to be simple and sort of "not bright." But underneath it all was a subtle wisdom. She once said, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." Worth pondering!

So in Judah's case, the nation's success was not defined by military might or political cunning. The success was found in their relationship with God. In Mary's case, her happiness was not defined by being selected one of the ten most beautiful people by *People* magazine, Palestinian edition. To young people, I would remind you that your security is not found in being popular but in Jesus Christ. To adults, your security is not found in your retirement fund or even in your health, but in Jesus Christ!

Teilhard de Chardin once wrote this: Joy is the most infallible evidence in the universe for the existence of God." Joy is why and how we celebrate Jesus even in the tough times. Because we have a deeper connection to God that defies "what is" right now.

And so I want to ask you. Why are you trying to go it alone, without Jesus? I am now addressing those of you who have not stepped into a relationship with Christ. It's like getting on a elevator with a really heavy suitcase and still gripping it, when you could let the elevator do your lifting. Why are you bearing your life's burdens alone, when God is real and near? God wants us to celebrate Jesus, even in the tough times.