

April 11 2021 Meditation 1: "That Joy May Be Complete"

Scripture Lesson 1: I John 1:1-2:2

1We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

I remember the moments very well.....

I remember that moment when I walked up to the platform in front of five hundred other graduates to receive my diploma from the University of Colorado, and the regent who handed me the rolled-up paper said, "Well done!"

I remember That moment when, before we were engaged, I went on a hike with Terri, below East Rock in New Haven, Connecticut, and while resting and talking found that we both realized we saw in each other a future together.

I remember Those three moments when the doctor proclaimed "It's a girl!", "It's a girl!" and "It's a boy!" (in that order but separated by several years.....).

I remember that day when our Conference sent me a formal letter stating my appointment to this church, which made my heart sing.

I remember That day when our daughter Molly and her husband Billy, full of smiles and energetic talk, told us they were expecting our first grandchild (OK, their first child!).

I remember That day when, after weeks of great pain and weakness, blood tests, x-rays, and cat scans, finding myself at the end of my rope facing an illness the doctors could not identify - I remember that day when the doctor entered my room with a tremendous smile on his face saying, "We've found out what it is, and can begin treatment immediately."

I remember That day when Theresa Cox enthusiastically let our building team members know that our church had been approved for a loan to renovate our building; I think she even audibly cheered?

What kinds of moments am I speaking about? Precisely the kind of moments our scripture passage is describing, moments which complete our joy through the sharing of good news. I John says it this way: "³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This passage highlights a fact about human life - to live that life, we must not only identify but share the goodness in the world. And one of the primary ways in which we do this is to proclaim that goodness, in all the ways we can, but especially when the goodness of the world is at risk. In the midst of mass shootings, rising pandemics, ugly politics, climate degradation, systemic racism, and widening economic disparity, all of which are painfully evident, we greatly need the identification and proclamation of the goodness essential to their redress, the goodness which God sent Jesus to identify and proclaim. Peace, not violence; cooperation, not confrontation; deliberation over differences rather than denigration; respect for the environment rather than outright exploitation; seeking equitable justice where there remains racial discrimination; moving towards greater economic balance to narrow the gaps of wealth and resources. These reflect the goodness God offers to the world, and which Jesus came to not only proclaim, but enact. As Christ's body, it is our constant work - and, if done in the company of the Spirit - our constant joy, to proclaim and enact these priorities as well.

Meditation 2: "That Joy May Be Real"

Scripture Lesson 2: "John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This week I've been down at the border our country shares with Mexico - not literally, but in study and learning. Several others in our church were participating in the Virtual Border Tour we've advertised for the last couple of weeks; in this online tour, we heard from and about pastors, workers, immigrants, and generally those in the vicinities where people are trying to cross the border into our country. Many are seeking asylum, running away from threats and dangers back in their home country.

Rev. Heidi Neumark is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan, and has made many visits to the border area. I would like to share her account of working alongside some of those immigrants seeking asylum; this is from her article, "See the Asylum Seekers' Wounds and Believe" (Christian Century; by Heidi Neumark; April 26, 2019): she writes:

"Although immigrants are repeatedly labeled as criminals, my experience with dozens of parents and children arriving at our border is that they are far more likely to be the survivors of violent crimes. Lacking police reports or other supporting evidence, asylum seekers are hoping to offer their scarred bodies as testimony.

I met Julissa and her 3-year-old son from Honduras. When Julissa was 7, her mother died and she went to live with an aunt and cousin. They put her to work doing all the cleaning, cooking, and washing while being verbally and physically abused. A year ago, Julissa's cousin sliced the right side of her face from ear to jawbone because he was enraged about something left unwashed. She pulled up her pink sweatshirt and showed me the scar on her side where

he'd cut her as well. She lost a lot of blood and tried to file a report, but the police waved her away, afraid of gang retaliation. Having nowhere to go, Julissa stayed put—until her cousin began beating her little boy. When she protested, he threatened to kill them both if they didn't get out of the house. They crossed the border and ended up in San Diego.

Julissa now asks me to consider the scars on her face and side. Are they bad enough? Do I think they are healing too well? The border is now a place where scars of abuse and violence are treasured as a way to prove credible fear."

This account stunned me, that one would hope to be scarred enough to prove they were running from a credible fear in their home country. It is testimony to the horrors of so many places in the world where violence is commonplace and security a joke. There are real victims desperately needing sanctuary.

But this made me think beyond the border crisis, towards the nature of our humanity in general, for who amongst us does not carry the mark of scars, on the outside of our bodies and/or on our hearts or minds, that are placed there by others, or even ourselves? Life tends to wound us in many ways, the most obvious regarding how we treat or mistreat each other, at the borders between countries, yes, but also at the borders between our relationships, or the borders between different cultures or nations or histories or genders or religions.....all too often, our interactions across these borders leave scars of one kind or another. And some scars are much worse than others.

Consider Jesus, in his appearance to the disciples in our Gospel passage this morning. Jesus presents himself after having died on the cross, and now he has been resurrected - and his first words to them are "Peace be with you." Then, he shows them his scars, the wounds on his hands, feet, side and head. It was then that the scripture says, "the disciples rejoiced." At the signs of the wounds, at the seeing the horrific scars, joy entered the room; this was not the joy of reunion so much as revelation, moving from peace to understanding to transformation that the horrors of the recent past were giving way to hope that was stronger, truer, and more worthy of life. It was as if the horror of the scars was now traded for joy that they signified a greater future, which we as the present-day body of Christ represent.

Scars signifying joy; not that anyone would wish for the horrors of the past, but that those very same horrors do not determine what the future might hold, those same scars demonstrating their lack of power to eradicate hope. And

having experienced those horrors, having clarity in working for their opposite becomes not just envisioned, but empowered.

This leaves us with something to consider: What would it mean if, in order to enter into complete joy, we need to look at our woundedness in a different way? Could it be that it is only as we face our scars, on the outside and on the inside, the wounds of the past or the ones we have freshly received, or even the injury of the future called worry and dread - that it is only as we touch our scars and experience their pain that we can realize that we have survived, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually - and can begin to move away from their darkness, toward greater light? Could it be that it is only as we face our woundedness that real joy becomes a possibility?

Jesus says "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Touch my scars; touch your own; and know that God's hope is greater still.