

Through the Tears Sunday, 12/20/20

How many of you are in the habit of pulling a jackhammer out of your garage when it comes time to do some gardening? If that sounds implausible to you, then you've probably never lived in a place like Arizona, where thick layers of naturally occurring deposits of calcium carbonate, Caliche, creates impenetrable concrete barriers that makes planting all but impossible without at least a small jackhammer like this one. If you haven't heard of Arizona Caliche, then maybe you've at least experienced hardpan, soil that's become dried out and compacted to the extent that it won't accept water anymore and is worthless for planting without some seriously deep tilling.

Here's the thing about hardpan. It's not impossible for life to flourish in it, but it does take some serious work and the right tools before that can happen. Without the right knowledge, the right tools, and the strength to do the work, it's easy to become frustrated and give up. Plenty of Arizona homeowners have destroyed their shovels while trying to plant a tree.

Life these days has become a little bit like standing in a field of hardpan. I suspect that there must be signs of life out there, but more and more what I see is dust and dry earth. There are plenty of tears falling to the ground, but even they don't seem to penetrate the parched earth and there are no jackhammers for rent that are big enough to solve this season of discontent.

The Prophet Jeremiah is known as the "Weeping Prophet," and yet there are some really hopeful promises given by God through Jeremiah's tears. One that we heard this morning was that "even in the barren land," God will give us rest.¹ The image I see when I read that is the cactus blossoms that come each spring to the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. They're breathtakingly beautiful, in part because it's so amazing to behold how God can support life in a landscape that seems so hostile to it.

That promise from Jeremiah came to God's people in the midst of their despair over their conquest and exile by foreigner invaders, a time of living parched lives that extended

¹ Jeremiah 31:2. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

not for months, but for decades. God’s promises are still alive for us today. God has promised to “rebuild” us and put us back on the dance floor, tambourines in hand.

Tambourines are pretty simply instruments, and they probably haven’t changed much since the days of Jeremiah. There’s a round frame, rim, or shell, often with a taut membrane or head stretched over the top, and metal disks that are alternately called jingles or zills. I’ve never played a tambourine, but it seems to me that it’s not exactly a somber instrument. It’s an instrument made for praising God and for dancing. I don’t know about you, but dancing is pretty much the last thing that I feel like doing these days, and sometimes even praising God isn’t the most natural inclination of my heart. But God has promised there will come a day when that kind of joyful spirit is restored to us. That’s a helpful, hopeful thing to hear God say as we’re standing in the hardpan field of 2020.

There are many other promises in the Scriptures that we’ll find God through our tears, especially the Psalms. I’m especially fond of Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.”² I wonder if that’s you today. Has your heart been broken? Has your spirit been crushed? Christmas is just around the corner, and as we near the end of our Advent journey, let’s remember that the first Christmases were not exactly the wonderlands filled with holiday cheer that the Coca-Cola company would have us believe in. Instead, there were actually plenty of tears to go around, as we’ll hear in our next reading from the Gospel of Matthew. I’m reading in chapter two of the New Living Translation, beginning in verse 13.

{Read Matthew 2:13-21, MSG}

This is a horrific, heart-rending account of the cruelty, pain, loss, and grief that fell upon the people of Bethlehem in the aftermath of the birth of Jesus. I honestly wrestled with whether I was going to share this with you today because it’s such a raw expression of grief coming at a time when our church family has more than enough grief to go around. But I decided I had to. This is the world Jesus was born into. This is the world Jesus came to save. And if Jesus understood that kind of unendurable affliction of the innocent, surely He understands the burdens we’re carrying in each of our lives.

² Psalm 34:18. Ibid.

In a strange way, this brokenness of Bethlehem that Jesus was born into is good news, because it signals to us that the healing of the nations that Jesus came to usher in isn't just some abstract political or theological promise that's disconnected from our daily lives. The birth of the Prince of Peace is for each of us in very real and personal ways. We can be confident that we'll find God through the tears of 2020 because we know that Jesus came to find us in the midst of a hardpan world two thousand years ago.

Jesus was not naïve, and he did try to warn us that the brokenness of this world will hurt us. "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows," Jesus warned his disciples, "But take heart, because I have overcome the world."³ How is that helpful to us today? The Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians that it's the blood of Jesus that's primarily responsible for making peace between us and God⁴, creating a kind of at-one-ment, or atonement, that draws us close to God. Regardless of whether our suffering is brought upon ourselves or simply the consequence of living in a broken world, the result is the same. Because of Jesus, we are close to God in ways that never were possible before Christmas.

What's more, Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to burn within our hearts, a reality that can't be erased by the troubles of this world. Paul expressed this so beautifully when he wrote,

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.⁵

This isn't one of those "how to" sermons with three easy steps to be happy again. That's just not real. No amount of self-help is going to avail us when we're standing over a

³ John 16:33. Ibid.

⁴ Ephesians 2:12-13

⁵ Ephesians 3:16-19. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

field of caliche and we're longing to see something green and living come out of the ground. What we need most in times like these is to be reminded of God's promises, and to believe that God's promises are good. Christmas might be a harbinger of grief for you this year, either because you'll be missing gathering with your family and friends, or because it's become an annual reminder of a personal loss that's just too difficult for you to bear. But Christmas can also be a harbinger of hope. The two don't have to be mutually exclusive. It's possible to be sad and at the same time be hopeful. We do need to be honest about our grief, but we can't do that if we're not also honest about our hope. Because as real as the pain of 2020 is, the birth and promise of Jesus is even more so. We know by experience that the suffering of this life is temporary. We know by faith that there will come a day when Jesus will give to us "a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning."⁶

There are, of course, many time-honored means of grace that we can avail ourselves of to be refreshed and reminded of God's goodness. You already know what they are: Worship, prayer, reading your Bible, journaling, expressing gratitude, generosity, serving others, fellowshiping with other Christians. Sometimes, in the depth of the darkness we find ourselves in, we just can't seem to manage even those most basic of Christian discipleship practices. If that's you today, then please don't heap self-condemnation on yourself. Instead, I encourage you to find some other way to embrace the promise of Christmas in the midst of your pain, so that you might find God through your tears. Finding God won't make all your pain go away, but it will restore your identity as a child of God, your purpose as a disciple of Jesus, and your hope that there will come a day when you'll feel again like taking up a tambourine and dancing.

Please take some time now to reflect on what you can do to find God through your tears this Christmas. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.

⁶ Isaiah 61:3. Ibid.



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