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## The Scandal of Joy

Philippians 1:3-11

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on December 6, 2015

by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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This is not any ordinary epistle. It's another one of Paul's letters and he's written these before. It employs the typical conventions of Greco-Roman epistolary rhetoric that are laid out in the work of the ancient rhetoricians Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. The first part of the letter is called the *exordium*; it's the beginning aspect of what is called 'arrangement,' which signals to the audience what is to follow. Paul begins his letter to the Philippians as he does many of his letters—with an expression of thanksgiving—"I thank my God every time I remember you." He assures the audience that he's praying for them. In many ways, this is a letter to friends, brothers and sisters in Christ at the church in Philippi. But what I want to bring your attention to this morning and what perhaps may be overlooked is that this is a letter from prison. That social context shouldn't be ignored because context matters. The text matters but con-text does as well; con-text, literally "with text." And what is with-in this text is the reality of imprisonment. How about that for Advent?

Paul is like those today who find themselves in prison, some of whom shouldn't even be there. It may be Advent but that doesn't mean there's a temporary inoculation for human pain and suffering. Refugees seeking asylum in Europe know this. Victims of gun violence in San Bernardino or Chicago know this. Someone who is in hospice near the end of his or her life on earth understands this. The psalmist said tears are my food day and night, and for some agony is a daily reality. Advent doesn't alleviate the pain we experience. It doesn't take away our depression or suicidal thoughts or any of our psychological, emotional, economic, or spiritual struggles. We still have them and yet it is still Advent. Advent in many ways may actually accentuate our suffering because it is a season in which we long for deliverance in all sorts of ways. We long for freedom from lonely exile here and Advent helps us recognize how we are not free, how we are not fulfilled, so we sing and pray constantly, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We wouldn't pray those words if all was well with the world and our lives.

Paul is in prison, preaching from prison, and we are eavesdropping on the mind and heart of a prisoner. Prisons or jails in the ancient Roman world were not like our modern day prisons. In that day, one commentator notes that they were no more than a "glorified pit" (Jake Myers) where prisoners, like Paul, relied on the outside world for survival needs such as food. Otherwise, the prisoner was just left to die. Paul represents a long history within the Church where faithful leaders found themselves in jail, writing letters, which have become instructive for us today. Though in bondage, those in prison may find a certain kind of freedom of expression amid hard circumstances.

On April 16, 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote what is now called the 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.' His letter was written in response to eight clergymen. This letter was begun on the margins of a newspaper in which the statement from the clergymen appeared. The letter was then continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by someone and then concluded on a pad his

attorneys were eventually allowed to leave with him. These clergymen questioned King's approach and thought his activities were "unwise and untimely" and believed he should just wait for things to change. King was desperate to respond so he started his letter on the margins of a newspaper. He writes to these church leaders by saying such things, as "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He affirms his nonviolent campaign as a way to help people "rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood" and as a means toward freedom because "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

In this historical context of U.S. segregation, and from prison, King argues that the great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is the moderate "who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." A letter from prison critiquing the "appalling silence of the good people" not the hateful words and actions of bad people. By no means is this a 'friendly letter' like Paul's but there's still a lot of love and truth in his pen. King loves the church which is why he writes this letter and critiques the church that has been lax and "been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." A prison letter from the 1960s perhaps still relevant in 2015. One shouldn't be surprised by his tone to his fellow clergy because of the situation of that day. There isn't really anything scandalous about what he writes. Nothing surprising shows up, I think. But there are many relevant lessons from what King 'preaches' from prison.

To write a letter beginning on the margins of a newspaper reveals the thankless, constricting, joyless location of a jail cell. A prison cell is not meant for comfort. It's meant to punish, bind, and control, and perhaps to dehumanize. Yet King voiced a certain kind of freedom, a freedom of expression that we may find liberating for us today. He never lost his voice in jail. We know where he really stood through his letter. And if we read the entire letter to the Philippians, we will also see where Paul stood on certain things or at least in his faith. We'll see that the key theme in this letter is ironically joyfulness (1:18, 25; 2:2,17,18,19, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). Brother Paul is in prison but he still says, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, rejoice." This is very different from the mood of King's letter and in many ways, Paul's letter is more scandalous than King's because of it.

He writes from prison but still says, "I thank my God" and I'm "constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you..." This mention of joy becomes the hallmark of his letter and this is a letter from prison. How is joy possible? How can he write, "my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord"? If anything is a scandal in what Paul writes, it is the scandal of joy. Joy is a scandal because many view it as the way *not* to act or be during times of grief and sorrow, yet Paul embraces this as his core theological motif while imprisoned. In the beginning of his letter, joy expresses itself as thanksgiving—"I thank my God." Thanksgiving is a form of resistance to death and depression and a theological articulation of resilience in the face of hard times. This embodiment of joy is not a sign of weakness or bad judgment or loss of touch with reality, but a demonstration that one is in touch with reality, in touch with God and God's way, God's life in Christ. Joy reveals that one knows God even in rough times. Even when injustice may lock you up in prison in what Michelle

Alexander calls “The New Jim Crow” of the prison industrial complex in this country, joy voiced through thanksgiving shows that life is not all grief and terror. Thanksgiving helps us transcend the raw edges of life and points us to an unspeakable joy in the midst of sorrow, even sinister circumstances.

But joy doesn't alleviate the pain we endure. It's not an escape valve from the reality of dangers, toils, and snares. Joy grows in the midst of pain because it's never disconnected from human life. “Pain is the matrix of praise,” according to Walter Brueggemann, and joy's *telos* is ultimately “the glory and praise of God” so genuine joy knows agony, knows prisons, knows crucified lockdowns. Anything other than joy amid sorrow or suffering is not really joy because as Lutheran theologian, Gordon Lathrop, writes, “The ground of our thanksgiving is found in a crucified man.” Thus, our thanksgiving, our eucharist, the expression of joy, should never be disengaged from suffering because we come to know God in the midst of suffering. Our faith develops and grows during tough times. Like Job, we can declare, “Though he slay me, [though imprisoned] yet will I trust him.” “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.” Like Jacob, we may walk away with a limp after wrestling with God but still never walk away from God. Limping yet still loving because the wounds of the crucifixion are not erased by the resurrection and we live the resurrection by carrying a cross. So Paul is in prison but he can still have joy. It is as Mother Pollard, an advisor to Dr. King during the civil rights movement, said—“my feet is tired but my soul is rested.”

This witness of authentic joy is a profound challenge to our contemporary Christian witness because it's not when the sun is shining that our joy is tested but in times of terrible storms when we will see if our joy is for real. I do wonder if imprisoned Christians are not the ones in jail but the ones who lack gratitude, a life of prayer, and joy without the purpose of praising God. I wonder if Paul in prison is actually freer than some of us whose spirits are enslaved by terror and fear because joy is liberating in its own way and can find expression in any situation of life. And because it is so free, it seeks to spread this spiritual fruit to others which is why Paul constantly stresses “all of you” showing how joy aims to be inclusive of others and never selfish but always desiring to be shared, always spilling over in excess. Joy is also hopeful as it anticipates “the day of Christ.” It operates with Advent in mind as it recognizes that today is not the only day there is; there is “the day of Christ” and we live under that horizon of hope and can experience a foretaste of joy divine.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident, was arrested in April 1943, by the Gestapo, he was imprisoned at Tegel prison for one and a half years. He eventually was transferred to a Nazi concentration camp and after being associated with a plot to assassinate Hitler, he was executed by hanging in 1945. But while he was in prison, he, too, wrote letters that were smuggled out of prison. Surprisingly, Bonhoeffer wrote a wedding sermon for his niece and her fiancé from his prison cell in which he says, “It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.” In the context of war and one of the worst human tragedies in history, while in jail, there is this wedding sermon born of wisdom and hope for the future of his loved ones. Writing a wedding sermon would not be the first thing on my mind in prison.

But Bonhoeffer realized that he could express life even in the midst of death. A jail cell could not imprison his joy. His outer circumstances could not destroy his inner strength. He even preached from prison through poetry. His aesthetic genius grew in the soil of suffering and melancholy.

One of his poems is actually named “Sorrow and Joy.”

*Sorrow and Joy:  
startled senses striking suddenly on our  
seem, at the first approach, all but impossible  
of just distinction one from the other:  
even as frost and heat at the first keen contact  
burn us alike....*

*Sorrow and Joy ...  
Those they encounter  
they transfigure, investing them  
with strange gravity  
and a spirit of worship....*

*Joy is rich in fears:  
Sorrow has its sweetness.  
Undistinguishable from each other  
they approach us from eternity,  
equally potent in their power and terror.*

In prison, in suffering, both sorrow and joy exist. We expect sorrow, naturally, in that context. Joy is the surprising one, even the scandalous one, and greets us every morning because “weeping may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning.” That means every day wherever you may find yourself is a day of joy. This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.

We might expect linguistic lashings against oppression during imprisonment but joy is the least expected during the worst of times. During Advent, during the holidays, it can be hard for families who have lost loved ones during this season. The holidays can bring haunting memories. It can be depressing. It can be lonely. But the promise of Advent, the promise of God, the promise of what Paul calls “the day of Christ” is the experience of joy not without the pain, but despite the pain we may endure. Advent is a season of expectant joy, genuine joy, perhaps even a sorrowful joy especially when one finds a home in jail. Nonetheless, God comes with joy this season. Joy to the world the Lord is come. I bring you glad tidings of great joy. I constantly pray with joy. A prison does not imprison Paul’s spirit. May suffering never enslave you to such an extent that it steals your joy. Lord, “the wellspring of the joy of living,” “Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away. Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!” Amen.