

“Rejoicing in the End of the Story”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice...The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:4-5.)

When I was in college, I had an English teacher who boasted that she never read a novel until she had first turned to the back of the book to see how the story ended. A number of us thought this was bizarre, especially for a literature professor. It seemed like she was somehow cheating the author, but, when we challenged her on this, she defended the practice by telling us that when you know how the story ends, it changes the way you experience the rest of the book. Now, you may not buy into that thinking when it comes to literature, but, when it comes to faith, this idea has profound implications, and, today, in our readings, what we find is that *knowing the end of the story makes all the difference.*

Our second reading from Philippians is one of the most remarkable in all of Scripture. It begins with emphatic words of encouragement from Paul, and his message is simple: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). These words have a ring of confidence and almost create the very joy they command, and, today, as we sit in a beautifully decorated and festive sanctuary, they seem to fit right into the theme of season. But, to truly understand the meaning behind Paul’s words, we need to know the circumstances in which they were written. You see, Paul wrote this letter to the Philippian church while he was being held as a prisoner in a Rome. His freedom was gone, his future was quite uncertain and, as Paul grew older and weaker by the day, waiting to learn his fate, he had every reason to despair. Instead, Paul writes an inspirational letter filled with encouragement, and overflowing with joy...and this contrast makes no sense to us. Judging by external circumstances, Paul was either losing his mind...or he knew something certain about how his story would end.

This is an important thing for us to see in Paul, because, in today’s Gospel reading from Luke, we find another prisoner facing an uncertain future. John the Baptist, had been jailed by Herod for preaching against his unlawful marriage, and, while John the Baptist was ultimately waiting for his execution, the isolation of his imprisonment appears to have created doubt, and, in this state of uncertainty, John wanted to know the end of the story. Luke tells us that John the Baptist sent two of his own followers to Jesus with this critical question: “Are you the one who was to come, or shall we look for another?” Commentators argue about this question, wondering whether it was John who doubted or if this was simply another way for John the Baptist to point people to Jesus, but, for our purposes, this argument doesn’t matter. You see, the question John sent his disciples to ask, is really a question about the end of the story. The goal of this inquiry from John was to find out if Jesus truly was the Messiah...if God had kept His promise to save and restore His people. John wanted to know the end of the story, because for John and his disciples, *and for each and every one of us*, knowing the truth about the future, changes the way we live and understand life in the present.

And this is so important, because, each day, we get caught up in and overwhelmed by the experience of our own stories. To use literary terminology, the rising action, the countless conflicts, and, especially, the climactic events in our lives create all kinds of anxiety and fear. Or, to frame this in Biblical terminology, the sin around us, and the sin inherent in our own hearts and expressed in our selfish actions, create all kinds of chaos and lead to separation from God and from others; and the darkness of our sin can quickly create doubt and despair. The truth is...everything about our story is flawed; the setting...the exposition...the characters...all of it comes from a place of sin and leads us to a place of death, and, without knowing the resolution of this sin-filled, mess-of-a-story, there is no hope, and, certainly, no reason to rejoice...and it’s to the helpless and hopeless and broken people of the world – *it’s to us!* – that God speaks today.

You see, in Paul's words of encouragement, and, in his call to rejoice, he also includes a word promise. It's a promise that points us directly to end of the story, and, in that promise, Paul proclaims: "The Lord is at hand." *The Lord is at hand!* The Lord is near! God is with us! My friends, this is the point of the Book! It is the unifying thread of Scripture...it is the reason for our peace...it is the source of our joy...it is the resolution to all our stories...and it is a truth that God has made know to you from day your faith was founded.

You see, in the moment of your Baptism, God provided the resolution to your story. There, at the font, Christ bound Himself to you and you were connected to His cross; there, your sin was put to death, and, in the miracle of your Baptism, God revealed the end of your story...and it is a fantastic ending! Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:3-5).

My friends, God does not leave us floundering in uncertainty and wondering about our future. God speaks to us with a clear word and He gives us the promise of an eternal future, and, even when the circumstances of our lives and the consequences of our sin threaten to destroy us, God's promise stands. This is exactly what we see in today's reading from Zephaniah. In the first two chapters, the prophet spoke words of destruction and punishment as he proclaimed God's judgment...but then, in the shadow of death, God promised life. He promised deliverance. He promised restoration. He showed them the end of the story, and, today, God speaks these promises to you: "Rejoice and exult with all your heart...The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil...The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zephaniah 3:14-18).

The resolution of your story was written at Calvary. There, on the cross, Jesus Christ, the King of Israel, the Son of God, the One who was to come, was present for you; He suffered and died in your place, and, in His resurrection, your story was rewritten and your life was redeemed. This is the gift God gave you in your Baptism, and, today, His message to you is a reminder of how your story ends... and knowing the end of the story ends changes the way you understand and live in the present; and that is what see in Paul.

As Paul sat in his prison cell, he knew that his life on earth was drawing to a violent end...and yet, he knew that the end of his life was not the end of the story. And so, with confidence in God's promise about the end of his story, Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21); and, he wrote, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (1:23); and, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14); and, finally, Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice...The Lord is at hand" (4:4-5).

Brothers and sisters, knowing the end of our story changes the way we understand our lives. And in a world gripped with uncertainty and consumed with fear, this Gospel gift of the Holy Spirit becomes the foundation of your faith and the source of your joy, and this "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:4-7). And, in Him, we can always rejoice. Amen.

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