

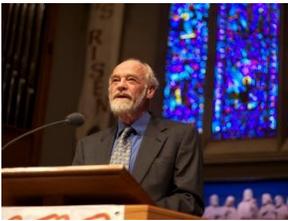
“Joy Ride: Joy in God’s Plan”



I’ve discovered that parenting is basically about convincing your children to do things they don’t want to do and to not do things they do want to do.

At least, that’s the stage we’re at in our household. Don’t hit your brother! “But he looked at me!” Brush your teeth! “I’ll do it later.” Turn off the TV! “I will when this is over!” It’s time to practice piano! “Do I have to?” ...You get the picture.

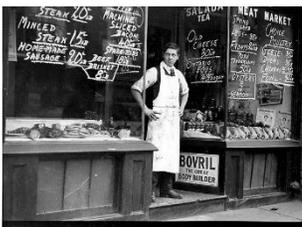
Parenting, I have learned, is about convincing our independent minded, freedom loving children to bend their wills, to curb their behavior, to learn to appreciate that we as parents have their best interest at heart, we know things they don’t yet know. And, we want them to have life, in all its fullness! So, sometimes that means sending them in directions they don’t want to go.



And of course, this is nothing new. The late great Eugene Peterson, in his book *The Contemplative Pastor*, recalls what it was like growing up as the son of a butcher.

He remembers, “When I was 5 years old, my mother made me a white butcher’s apron. Every year, as I grew, she made me another to size. I was started out on easy jobs of sweeping and cleaning display windows. I graduated to grinding hamburger.

One of the men would pick me up and stand me on an upended orange crate before the big, red Hobart meat grinder and I would push big chunks of beef into its maw. I thought I was a real butcher now!



The day I was finally trusted with a knife and taught to respect it and keep it sharp, I knew adulthood was just around the corner. “That knife has a will of its own,” one of my Dad’s butchers

would say. “Get to know your knife.” If I cut myself, he would blame me not for carelessness but for ignorance – I didn’t “know” my knife. I still had much to learn.

I learned that a beef carcass has a will of its own. Carving a quarter of beef into roasts and steaks was not a matter of imposing my will on dumb matter, but respectfully and reverently working with what I had before me.

“Hackers” was my father’s contemptuous label for butchers who ignorantly imposed their will on the meat. They used knives and cleavers inappropriately and didn’t keep them sharp. They were bullies forcing their will on slabs of bacon and hind quarters of beef. The results were messy and unworthy.”

Peterson recalls, “This environment taught me, not only about being a butcher but also about being a Christian. I learned to live in submission to the conditions I was given, a cultivation of humility.” As Christians we are not passive – there is much work to be done – but we must also learn to submit ourselves to the will of God. We don’t manipulate God to our will, but we learn to accept that God has our best interests at heart.



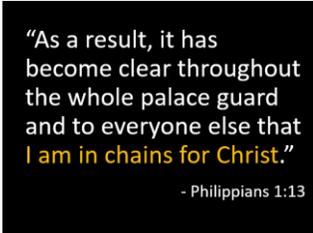
Well, today we are continuing in our second week of our series called “Joy Ride.” Last week, as Paul addressed his flock in Philippi he revealed just who we really are in Christ (saints), what the church is really for (personal transformation) and why it matters (part of something bigger than ourselves).

“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really **served to advance the gospel.**”
- Philippians 1:12

But this week, Paul is throwing us into the deep end. Opening pleasantries aside, he is getting right to the heart of the matter. “Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,” Paul says.

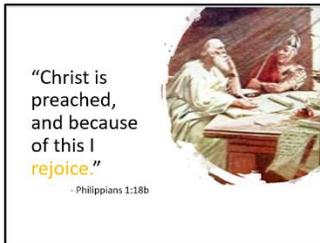


If you recall, last week I mentioned that Paul is writing this overall, incredibly joyful letter from prison. It's not looking good for Paul, actually. Not only has his career as a church planter been put on pause, but he might not make it out alive. It's entirely possible that it's all about to come to a rather anticlimactic conclusion.



And yet, Paul has recognized that all is not hopeless; even here he has an opportunity for real joy. "As a result," he says, "it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."

In other words, Paul is taking this opportunity to continue his life's work. He hasn't slumped into depression or been overcome by anxiety. Because, if God is in charge then prison must be where he needs to be. If he can't plant a church or tend to his far-flung flocks, then God must want him to minister to those at hand; Roman guards. And that's just what he's done. "Christ is preached, and because of this I rejoice," he says.



This is a remarkable mindset. To see purpose and hope in even the most unfortunate and discouraging of circumstances.



To know Christ is to know meaning in our failures, to find encouragement in our disappointments. And repeatedly throughout Christian history, people of faith have managed to do just that. And it is in this rather skewed Christian worldview that we rise and shine. It's where we find our joy!



Earlier this week I was home at my parent's house in Ancaster overnight, and we decided to go see a movie. We weren't quite sure what to see, so we settled on the movie *Rocketman*. I wish I could recommend it.

We walked out of the theatre and we all agreed it was a very sad movie. It's the story of Elton John, who, born with a remarkable gift for music set off on a career that would spiral out of control with drugs, sex, narcissism and self-destruction.



Haunted throughout his life by his dysfunctional relationship with his parents, and always trying to compensate for his shortcomings with flashier shows and more elaborate costumes, it eventually all came crashing down.



The ending of the movie attempted to re-frame Elton John's life as a story of overcoming, concluding that he had got himself clean, founded a charity for AIDS, was doing good work and was raising a family, but I don't buy it. It's still a sad story of someone with a remarkable gift succumbing to all the enticements and broken narratives of the world. It's a case study of what happens when someone doesn't know who they are, where to find transformation and why it matters.

The younger Elton John, saw his life's crises and sufferings as challenges to be solved by looking for answers in the idols at his disposal (alcohol, drugs, sex and fame).

"Yes, I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."
- Phillipians 1:18-19

In contrast, the Apostle Paul facing his own disappointments says, "Yes, I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."

Do you see the difference? That's why Christians can rejoice even in the face of life's most challenging circumstances.



See, Paul knows, "Whence commeth my help? My help commeth from the Lord." Paul knows that the prayers of his beloved community matter. And so, he gathers up this strength from outside himself

"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

- Philippians 1:21

and faces life head on. And with this assurance, he's even prepared to die. "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Do you see the joy that is given to us as followers of Jesus? Do you see the difference it makes? Because Jesus' story is our story, and God's promises are promises for us, and because the Holy Spirit is ours, we have a future so wonderful that we can make sense of our short-term pain. We can trust that in every circumstance, God is on the throne, Christ is our redeemer and the Spirit is our guide.

Last week, for the Music for Reflection Andrea sang a song called, "Joy is like the Rain." At home, we got talking about that song, and I decided to look up the story behind it.



Turns out, it was written by a woman named Sister Miriam Therese Winter. She belonged to a group called the Medical Mission Sisters. The Medical Mission Sisters was a Catholic congregation in Pennsylvania, that ran international hospitals, serving the poorest people in India, Pakistan and Ethiopia.

It was Miriam's desire to become a doctor, and to travel to foreign country's serving God by healing people. So, she joined the sisterhood.

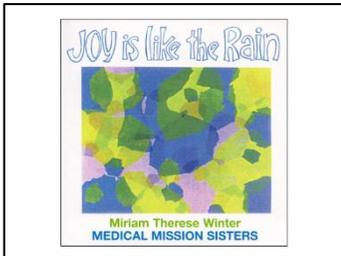


But once admitted, Miriam was assigned not to study medicine but music. Against her plans, she was sent to study pipe organ, but the convent didn't even have an organ, with a minor in SATB Chorale, but the convent had no T's or B's!

Miriam was in crisis. Everything she had hoped for was falling apart. She was being sent where she didn't want to go, and she was now qualified to do something that had no purpose (that she could see). In 1965, Miriam, at her lowest point said, "I

was about to take my final vows, and I was screaming at God. How could you do this to me? I gave you my life and it's over."

There, in her room, looking out at a dreary rainy day, Miriam picked up her guitar and began to sing. And what came out was the song, *Joy like the Rain*.



Miriam later noted, "Since then, everywhere I have gone on earth, "*Joy Like the Rain*" has gotten there before me." The song went on to be a Grammy-award-winning worldwide hit. Response was so strong that other songs were written and a marathon 8-hour recording session was

commissioned. The first album was recorded by the Medical Mission Sisters, and it sold millions of copies.

This is God's grace. We do not create it, implement it or influence it. It changes us. And when it does, realities we could never imagine become possible.

I don't know what disappointments you're facing in your life. I don't know what dreams have been quashed, what challenges you have faced, what burdens you carry. And of course, none of us knows exactly what the future holds.



But I wonder, what difference would it make to know God is in charge?

Is it possible that He has our best interest in mind? And, rather than going it alone, trusting our own wisdom, creating our own plan, what if God is inviting us to head in a direction we never would have considered, to prepare us for something we can't quite see on the horizon?

This morning Paul has thrown us into the deep end of the Christian faith. This is not Christianity 101, but it is where we will find a joy that endures. But the reality is, that when we can trust that God is at work in our lives, making a future that is better

than we imagine, it is a source of joy. We are liberated to live in the moment, enjoy the ride and find peace in even the most challenging moments.

How we define our lives determines our capacity for that kind of joy. Who or what are you living for? This morning, Paul, faced by a situation that is both demeaning and demoralizing says, "Don't worry, I'm not discouraged. I'm living for something else."

Who are you living for? Who are you trusting with your hopes and dreams?

Thanks be to God, Amen.