

March 29, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: Passing Through Difficulties
Text: Psalm 91



So, I binged watched a season of Naked and Afraid XL yesterday. If you don't know the show, it's going to sound really weird. It's on the Discovery Channel, so I'm sure I was watching something much more sophisticated when I came upon it. Anyway, in regular seasons two people- a male and female- total strangers are taken out to some beautifully horrible remote spot on the globe where they shed their clothes and attempt to survive naked and afraid for 20 days. Jungles, deserts, swamps with deadly wildlife, poisonous insects, and venomous snakes; they face dehydration, starvation and everything imaginable to test their determination to survive both physically and emotionally in total vulnerability while being filmed for tv.

I feel a little like we've all been dropped into a new version of Naked and Afraid these weeks. We have clothes on - sweatpants and pajamas are now 'office' attire. We have basic needs: food, water and toilet paper- and there's not a scorpion crawling up our leg at night, but our souls are NAKED and afraid none the less. Our spirits are stripped bare and vulnerable as we have no control of our days and our emotions can spring upon us - like a cougar out of no where. Any moment disbelief, fear or grief can catch us off guard. So when panic tries to snatch our heartbeat and fear wants to drive,

I grabbed for The Book of JOY. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu collaborated with writer Douglas Abrams to produce The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World. It was published in 2016, but it is ever so relevant today. It's pages are filled with messages of inspiration from these two men who have known great suffering and who embody great joy.

The first stage of their discussion names those things that can block JOY - obstacles to Joy. The Dalai Lama gave us the "MENTAL IMMUNITY CHALLENGE" last week. This challenge takes longer to accomplish than the ice bucket challenge or flipping the water bottle to land upright trick. It take much practice and mental training to accomplish the mental immunity challenge. And it's not a flash fad that rises and falls with a viral YouTube. It is a journey of a lifetime. That's what we are about- a lifetime journey- to Joy together.

Early on the premise of the book lays the foundation that We are made for happiness. We are made for joy. God made us in delight and goodness. People want to be happy; we just don't know how. We go looking for it in so many ways. and so many of those ways actually move us farther away from the true joy we seek. Our life is a journey to discover joy taking up residence in our heart.

Archbishop says, "the goal is not just to create joy for ourselves but 'to be a reservoir of joy, an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around you.'" Joy is in fact quite contagious. It is spread through love, compassion and generosity. (63) If we are not careful, when suffering comes, we can see it as an obstacle to our wellspring of joy. How can we possibly be joyful when our world is tumbling down around us? There is a Tibetan saying that adversities can turn into good opportunities. Even a tragic situation can become an opportunity. I'll share with you a familiar Chinese folk tale:

There was once a farmer who owned only one horse. He needed that horse for everything, to plow, to pull the wagon. To live. One day, a bee stung the horse, and in fright, it ran away into the mountains. His neighbor came to visit him and said, "We are really sorry about your bad luck in losing your horse." The old farmer shrugged and said, "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say?"

A week later his horse came back accompanied by twelve wild horses. The farmer was able to corral all of the fine animals. News spread and his neighbors returned. "Congratulations on your bonanza!" they said. The old farmer replied, "Good luck, bad, luck, who can say?"

The farmer's only son decided to make the most of the situation and started to break the wild horses so they could be sold and worked. He got thrown off of one of them and broke his leg badly. Now, the farmer had no one to help him. News of the accident spread; the neighbors came to say, "We are sorry for the bad luck of your son's fall." The old farmer replied, "Good luck, bad luck, who's to say?"

Several weeks later, war broke out in China. The army came through the village conscripting all young men, but because of his son's badly injured leg, they did not take him. "Good luck, bad luck, who can say?"

The folktale reminds us that we do not know how the circumstances of life will work out. I don't think we worship a vending machine god that we can control to dispense what we want when we push a button. I don't think we worship a grand puppeteer god, who pulls strings and makes bad things happen to us. God does not send disease upon the earth or particular people in order to teach us or for any reason. God is with us in the difficulties- not creating them against us.

The old farmer knew that, by its very design and nature, life is full of joys and sorrows. In the moment of the present, it is hard for us to interpret the stuff of life. We know there will be times of trial in our lives. Our prayer is that God's spirit will be with us giving us the wisdom and grace and strength to survive the trials and learn from them and grow in them. Yes, and bring joy in them.

The Dalai Lama and the people of Tibet have lived a tragic tale full of suffering. The Tibetan civilization has existed for ten thousand years, and in some areas of the Tibetan plateau, human habitation existed for as much as 30,000 years. During the invasion, Chinese officials made a pledge that within fifteen years the Tibetan language would be eliminated. So they burned books, 300 volumes of Tibetan canon of scriptures and several thousand volumes of literature. The books burned for weeks. They faced the loss of their entire nation, cultural heritage, and language and many many lives. Children still leave their parents at very young ages to travel into exile for school.

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the people of South Africa lived a tragic tale full of apartheid suffering which left the caste system crushing the lives and souls of African people. From them we learn, that it is the suffering that makes us appreciate joy. Though the times of greatest suffering, some lost hope; some kept going. Some people it embittered; some it ennobled. What what the difference in the outcome of the suffering?

The Archbishop responded, In the end, it was their inner spirit, that made the real difference. The difference lies in whether we are able to find meaning in our suffering. "

Without meaning, when suffering seems senseless, we can become embittered. But when we can find a shred of meaning or redemption in our suffering, it can ennoble us. Passing through our difficulties can bring the depth of suffering; it can also result in the height of our joy.”

We can find meaning as we pass through this difficult time, for we will pass through it. It is important to remember that it will pass. So, what meaning can come from this difficult time?

We can find meaning in allowing this time to mend divisions and see each other as ONE. We can find meaning in knowing that it is in difficult times that we can grow closer to one another - even if physically separated.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says: “We don’t really get close to others if our relations is made up of unending hunky-dory-ness. It is the hard times , the painful times, the sadness and grief that knit us more closely together.” (111) So we can find meaning in this time as we will draw more closely as ONE people.

We can set aside differences and become more compassionate towards one another in this time. Compassion for those who have lost jobs, compassion for the many who have lost loved ones, and those who fear. We need this to be a time of healing our nations divides. It would be nice if our national leadership would do that, but if they won’t, we shall.

If anything is to bring to the full awareness of our global connection it is this. A small food market in a distant city has shown us the connection that now unites us around the world.

We can find meaning in seeing how our actions of slowing down, pausing in our driving and reducing pollution proves that the earth is eager to heal if we will learn from this and continue to live in a new way that allows her to do so.

After we have passed through this time, can you imagine the JOY and appreciation that will be magnified in these things we have sacrificed- hugging a friend, shaking a hand, gathering for worship face to face, children playing tag and sitting together in classrooms. The joy will abound in such great appreciation. Our task then will be to remember and embrace the gift of each blessing even after we have passed through the difficulties.

This is the story that we find in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The Hebrew people passed through difficult times - over and over and over. Rituals were created to remember those times - not in some macabre way - but so that the JOY that came from those journeys would remain alive in the people. Each year, the passover is a remembrance of deliverance through difficulties. Each communion is a remembrance of new covenant that came through crucifixion. Each Sabbath is a pause to remember the JOY that springs forth new hope as she is reborn each dawn.

The Joy that can reside in our heart as we give her time to grow as we cherish her is our ritual of remembrance. Dwelling the the heart of all of us is the God of grace - that will infect us all with love, compassion and joy each day as we delve into the wellspring of the Divine. Amen.