

Peace & Joy in the Present

Knowing the context of today's Gospel lesson (Maundy Thursday at the Last Supper), it is clear from our Lord's own words that He's pointing the disciples to ***His imminent death and resurrection—Good Friday to Easter Sunday***. “*You will have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*” In just a few short hours Jesus will die and be laid to rest in a tomb. The disciples won't see Him for a couple days, and they will—no doubt—be filled with sorrow. You would too. **HOWEVER**... just a few short days later and Jesus will rise from the dead. He will see them again (like He promises them) and they will see Him again, and they will rejoice, ***and no one will be able to take that joy from them***; not the Pharisees, not the Romans, not the devil himself... no one.

As faithful Christians, we also understand how these words apply in a ***broader sense***; outside of the three days between Maundy Thursday eve and Easter Sunday morning. We don't see Jesus here and now, at least not in all His resurrected glory. It's very easy to feel like you're all alone. And there's no denying the fact that we do have sorrow in the here-and-now. But... we also know that there will come that wonderful time when all our earthly sorrows will be turned into heavenly joys. There will come that time (either when we die or when Christ returns in judgment; whichever comes first) when we will see Jesus face-to-face in all His heavenly majesty and glory, and then we will rejoice, and that rejoicing will go on for all eternity, and no one and nothing will be able to take that joy from us.

Let's come at this from a different angle though. “*A little while and you won't see Me, and a little while, and you will see Me.*” I want you to see things through the eyes of the disciples, ***but don't skip ahead to the time after He breathed out His last and was laid to rest in the sealed tomb, when no one could see Him***. I want you to think of that turbulent and terrible time immediately following the Last Supper, when Jesus was being arrested and beaten up and spit upon and mocked. Think about those horrendous six hours or so that Jesus hung on that bloody cross in between two criminals. If you were tasked with picking Almighty God out of the lineup of all the people involved in the suffering and death of Jesus, you wouldn't be able to. ***The disciples certainly couldn't see the Almighty in the midst of all this suffering and sorrow***. Despite all they had seen and heard over the course of three years, when things went off the rails that Thursday eve into Friday morning, **they didn't see Almighty God**. Nope. They saw nothing more than a battered, bloodied man in the final stages of ultimate defeat. It's not that they ***couldn't*** see God. It's that they ***wouldn't*** see God. Their preconceived notions got in the way. They had their ideas of what God is supposed to look like and how He's supposed to work, and the events unfolding

before their very eyes *blinded them* **from seeing God actually at work.** Understand: They saw God in the flesh, and yet full of sorrow and grief and fear worry, they were blinded. They *didn't* see God.

And let's not fool ourselves. Are we really any different? In fact, the question needs to be asked: *Are we worse?* After all, we know what those guys didn't know at the time. We know the rest of the story. We know how it all plays out. We also know what our Lord Himself says about His promise to abide with us always, even to the end of the age. We know how He keeps that promise of very real presence with us *in and through His Word and sacraments.* And yet... there are still times when suffering and worry rear their ugly heads in our lives and we run and hide and cry out and lament, wondering why it seems like we're all alone. *We don't see God. More specifically, we don't see what we want to see; what we're looking for.*

Now, I could go into the many and various ways we demonstrate this sinful blindness in our daily lives, but I won't. Instead, I'm going to focus you on how God addresses such *sinful blindness and unbelief.* Take a look at the Old Testament lesson. To briefly set the context, Israel is suffering in hard-hearted, thick-skulled unbelief. They've turned away from God. They're doing what makes them feel good. In an attempt to be *popular/prosperous rather than faithful,* they've given themselves over to their wicked neighbors and their false gods. God's beloved bride has turned adulterous and has become a whore (KJV).

But God hasn't stopped loving them. He is calling them to repentance through Isaiah. But they refuse to listen. They refuse to repent and return. It's so bad that Isaiah and the faithful are in danger of losing hope. *Are things so bad that not even God can turn these fools around and bring His promise to fruition? These folks are hell-bent on doing their own thing!* This is when God confronts Isaiah in his fear/worry: *"To whom will compare Me, that I should be like him?"* I'm not like all those other gods or people. I don't work the way they work. What other god/person are you going to possibly compare Me to?! *God then commands Isaiah to look up and look at the stars.* The Hebrew word used here in reference to the stars is *sabaoth*, which means "host." It's actually a military term. A *sabaoth/host* is a huge assembly of soldiers/angels. Mighty Pharaoh had a host of soldiers. King David had a host of soldiers. We even hear of God's heavenly host—the angels—those mighty beings of light. You know... *"Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!"*

God tells Isaiah to look at the stars—the heavenly host—telling him that He, as *Yahweh Sabaoth—the Lord of the heavenly hosts*—marches each and every single star out at night (like the commander of the guard) and positions it in its exact spot every single night. *Not one single star is ever AWOL. Not one single star is ever out of place.* You can't help but see how God is also alluding to His

heavenly angels, who are tasked with watching over us and protecting us. Not one is ever AWOL or out of place. The point is clear: Almighty God does this great and awesome thing every single night for you, which you can clearly see and behold. Not one is out of place; not even a little. ***Do you see?*** And if you can see this; if Almighty God can do all this without so much as breaking a sweat, then ***what makes you think He can't handle all the other lesser things that have you all bunkered down and acting like Doubting Chicken Little?***

It's so fitting that these texts, appointed centuries ago for this fourth Sunday of Easter, are appointed for our meditation today. ***God is actively at work... still!*** Here we stand, between the time of Christ's Easter resurrection and that day in the future when we will see Christ in all His heavenly glory. Here we stand right now in the midst of sorrow, darkness, fear, and uncertainty. ***Look up! Look back*** to the cross and the tomb. ***Look forward*** to that magnificent day when Christ returns in all glory and puts an end to all this sorrow and suffering, ***BUT... don't just look back; don't just look forward, as if God is only Lord of the past and the future.*** Lift up your eyes and behold! Here is your Almighty God, right where He promises to be; right in your very midst!

Tonight, go outside and look up. Not one single star is ever out of place. Look up and then remember the fact that God has promised something ***far greater than all the stars in the universe for us.*** *"As often you do this, remember what I have said. This is My Body. This is My Blood. I am with you always, even to the end of the age. I am with you always, even in the midst of your suffering and struggling and trials and tribulations. I am with you always, even in the midst of sorrow and despair and loss and grief."* Even when we are surrounded by and swallowed up in the darkness of sin and sorrow and sickness and wickedness and corruption and unrest and all other manners of woe, the light of Christ ever shines forth, piercing the darkness and giving to us ***His joy, His peace, His comfort, His assurance.*** Do you not see? It's right here! If you're not seeing, then maybe it's because you're looking for the ***wrong things in the wrong places.*** Repent and turn... and rejoice in your very present and unfailing peace; the peace that surpasses all understanding; the peace that neither height nor depth nor powers or principalities can overcome; the peace that not even the gates of hell can prevail against. May this same Christ-centered, Immanuel joy and peace guard and keep your hearts and minds ever grounded in Him, and may His joy and peace be and remain with you now and into all eternity.

AMEN