

Behold the Beauty and Joy of God

“I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

For the last few weeks we have been listening to Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, as he says goodbye to his followers on the eve of his death. Jesus stands on the threshold between life and death, between his ministry on earth and his glorification as he returns to God. As I have preached from Jesus' farewell, I have spoken much of how joy is very much at the center of Jesus' life and ministry. In the line I've quoted above, Jesus is praying out loud to God so that his disciples and all of us (the readers) can overhear this intimate conversation between himself and God. God gave us this brilliant and bright shining Son so that we might know God's joy, love, compassion, justice and mercy completely. But God underestimated our willingness to accept such a gift. A treasure, such as this gift represents, comes perhaps with too many strings attached. But still, God's love for us seeks us out, and our rejection of this love cannot kill God's hope that we might embrace the freedom and joy that this great love holds. Here he is on the eve of his death, at the hands of those he came to deliver, and he begins to pray for those he is leaving behind. We can't understand Jesus' prayer fully until we understand a little bit about John, the author of this sometimes confounding Gospel. John is a poet, you see, and his language and images spring out of his poetic imagination. His work is full of dualism—the great battle between darkness and light. For John there is God's created order, the stars, the moon, the seas, the mountains and prairies, and the people, the animals—all of the things God gazed upon and declared “good!” And in God's hope for this creation, there is joy, justice, mercy, compassion and beauty. And then there is “the world” and the “evil one” who seems to have a lot of influence on all of these marvelous works that God has done. For John, the world and the evil one represents all that opposes God's will for us. God's will is no more or no less that we might have God's joy and have it abundantly. They represent all that seeks to destroy what is beautiful, hopeful, kind and good, and life-giving. These are the things that steal our joy. “The world” is the dominion of war, greed, lust, dominating power, violence, degradation and oppression. Cast in those terms, it seems like something so dramatic and so obviously horrible that any right-thinking person would never go anywhere near these pitfalls. But we all know these forces are subtler than that. Their power over us is in how sweetly they call us into believing they have something good to offer. We are bombarded with constant messages that tell us to self-protect, to get our piece of the pie, to look out for number one. What we often forget is that if we self-protect too much, we end up killing, not loving our neighbor. If we focus too much on getting our piece of the pie, we usually end up with more than our fair share. And if we get lost in looking out for number one, we become deeply suspicious of all those who are not number ones...

Now, because it is still Easter and because we are an Easter people, let's cross over, back into the light, and take hold of that Joy and Truth that is at the heart of Jesus' prayer. The Light of Christ is so bright and so strengthening and so life-giving that the evil one's power can never extinguish it. Never doubt it. If we feel like we are in the grip of darkness, all we have to do in the end is remove our hands from our eyes and see God's startling and gracious love everywhere. We are invited to live in the presence of God (this is eternal life now). Or, to put it another way, both Jesus' life and prayer invites us to live in such a way that we make God more present, both to ourselves and to others. Our every word and every action, no matter how ordinary, can be performed in a way that makes God more present in this world. God is present in every place, at every moment; remember—we are absolutely swimming in God. It's only our perception that is clouded. Whatever we do to increase awareness of this reality is a courageous decision to take part in God's never-ending love for the world—today and always.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+