

TITLE: “The Joys of Spiritual Battle”

Joy is a curious thing. Joy is something we search for diligently, and something we even sorrow for when we don't get it. When Hannah went up to the holy place to pray, her heart was full of sorrow because she desperately longed for the joy of motherhood, but she was barren. In fact, the Scriptures say that the Lord had closed up her womb. But Hannah had everything that she needed. She had a husband who loved her deeply, who took care of her and provided her with everything that a wife could want. It was common in those days for men to have multiple wives, so Hannah's husband Elkannah had another wife named Penninah, and she did not get along with Hannah.

Penninah had many sons and daughters, but Hannah it appears, was her husband's favorite. So a rivalry developed, and every year when they went up to the tabernacle to sacrifice to God, Elkannah would give Penninah and her children their meat, but he would give Hannah a double portion because he loved her. This kind gift was turned into a mark of shame that Penninah used to mock Hannah for her barrenness. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, Penninah provoked her till she wept and would not eat. And her husband would say to her, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you sorrowful? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?”

One year, after the feasting was finished in the Lord's House, Hannah stood before the gate of the tabernacle and prayed with such intensity that she wept as she prayed. She was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli the High Priest thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine." At this Hannah replied, "I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord." After explaining her troubles to Eli, he extended to her the Lord's blessing and promised her that God would grant her request for a child. Hannah's faith in the Lord led her to trust that Eli's priestly blessing would come true, and she returned home with her head held high. Within a year, Hannah would give birth to a son, whom she would name Samuel, and he would be one of the greatest and most godly men who ever lived. Hannah's song of thanksgiving that she sang to the Lord would later inspire the song of St. Mary, the mother of our Lord, that we call the Magnificat.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Christ compares Christian joy to the joy of the mother who has just delivered her child. The birth pangs last only for a little while, and then they are forgotten for "the joy that a man is born into the world." Today Christ is teaching us to keep our hearts and minds focused on the goal, on the crown of righteousness that he promises to all his faithful servants. If we constantly meditate on the joy of knowing God, of one day seeing him face to face in the land of the living, then there will be no task too difficult, no burden that we would be

unwilling to bear, knowing that if we submit to the yoke of God, then we will pass quickly through this veil of tears, as if we were only sojourners and pilgrims in this life.

On this third Sunday after Easter, the Church appoints our lesson from St. John's Gospel in the context of the ancient custom of baptizing new converts on Easter Day. In essence, all of the lessons of Eastertide were meant for these new converts, to encourage them as newborn babes, to keep moving, to keep following Christ, to take up the cross every day, and to fight manfully under his banner, as they had vowed they would do in their baptism. Today the combined meaning of our lessons would teach the new Christian that it is a very normal Christian experience to feel disappointed, lonely, sorrowful, and afraid. These are normal human experiences, of course, but the new Christian would need to hear this message again, because the joys promised to us in our baptism, the joys of Easter triumph – hearing the story of Christ's great victory, his bursting down the gates of death, and rising again with healing in his wings, so that all who pass through the saving waters of baptism will be made partakers of that same resurrection – all of these magnificent truths given to "me" could potentially lead me to have an unrealistic view of my new life as a Christian.

Theologians refer to this as a "realized eschatology". What does that mean? Eschatology means the "knowledge of the last things". In particular, in theology, we

refer to “the four last things”: the reality of death, the certainty of judgment after this life, and the expectation of heaven for those who love God, and Hell for those who do not. Death, judgment, heaven, and hell, these are the four last things, eschatology. All of the promises of God, the wedding ceremony, can easily lead a bride into thinking that the feeling of marital bliss will last forever. But marital bliss is not the primary purpose of holy matrimony. As the Church has always taught, the primary purpose of marriage is bearing children and raising them for the glory of God. And with the bearing of children there comes both sorrow and incredible joy. So the young bride learns that marriage was only the beginning, and the young convert learns that baptism was only the beginning. It was not the end.

There have always been Christians who live as though the end has already come. I remember a decade or so ago, when protests erupted in Iran against the Islamic government, that because the demonstrations went on for a long time without being suppressed by the military, some believed they would eventually succeed in ousting the Ayatollah. There was a video of a woman, standing on the corner of a street in Tehran, where the law requires women to be covered from head to toe, and this woman was wearing only a bikini. As the cars passed her by, one man leaned out of his window and shouted, “has the revolution succeeded already?” In other words, the war has not even begun, why are you out in the street acting like the war is over? You’re going to get yourself killed.

Since the beginning, some Christians have been tempted to live this way as well, as though the battle against our spiritual enemies was over the moment we were baptized, simply because Christ has gotten the victory. St. Paul warns the Thessalonians against those who teach that the resurrection has already happened. Other examples of this occur in the history of the Church: some like the gnostics and the Cathari taught that the body is evil, that pain is merely an illusion, and that the true self is the soul, that the goal of this life is merely to escape the body. For them, the resurrection isn't even a reality to look forward to, but merely a metaphor for what happens only in the soul. Others, like the early Quakers and some of the Revivalists on the American frontier taught that because the resurrection is only spiritual, and because it has already occurred, so we can be free to live how we want in our bodies, that God doesn't care about the body or what we do in them, and so some of them became nudists, and others used their freedom in Christ as a license to commit sexual sins. This is why St. Peter warns us against "using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness."

In our lessons for today, the message to us is quite clear: in Christ the end has come, but for us, the battle of the last days of earth has only just begun. The war is not over, it's only just beginning. Because this is a spiritual battle, it must be fought by faith and not by sight. Because this is a spiritual battle, with ramifications not only for this life but for eternity, the weapons of this war must also be obtained from

beyond this life, by faith and by prayer. We are to live as sojourners and pilgrims in this world, and this is because of the resurrection, because of the four last things. We are those who know by faith that we will rise again in the body, and that we will be judged according to the things that were done in the body. This is, indeed, a fearful thing, as it is always a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Lord. But, for those who know the power of the resurrection, who utilize that power as a weapon of war in this life, who put to death the deeds of bodily lusts and pleasures and selfish aspirations, preparing the body for that last Day, those who live by faith and not by sight also know that there will be nothing for them to fear on day of judgment. And, in fact, those who know the pangs of spiritual childbirth, who live in the body knowing that this corruptible body will soon put on incorruption, those will greet the rising of the eternal sun on that Day as a happy morning, because then all of our dreams will be made a reality, as we hear the voice of Jesus say, “well done, my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”

On that day, all of the trials, the tears and the anguish that we felt here below, if we have born them by faith, knowing against all knowledge, hoping against all hope, that God was doing something good in this evil world, on that day all of the pain will be turned into open knowledge as we see God’s storehouse where he kept the memory of every tear we ever shed in his bottle, every hair that fell from our head cherished, every doubt turned into repentance and celebrated, every temptation

shunned and glorified, that God kept these as a memorial of saintly perseverance in the great battle for the Kingdom of Heaven. On that day, when we are released from the burden of sin, regret, and guilt, basking ourselves in the sunlight of love that shines forth from the face of Jesus Christ, rejoicing in him with all of the saints in light, then once and for all, the sufferings of this present life will pass away like the sleep of a night, and we will be awakened to our true resurrected life, with our true loves beside us in our eternal home.

Perhaps we'll even sing Psalm 126, that says,

When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. 2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them. 3 The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad. 4 Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the south. 5 They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. 6 He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

Perhaps we will sing with Hannah her song on that day, saying,

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,

And the hungry have ceased to hunger.

Even the barren has borne seven,

And she who has many children has become feeble.

“The Lord kills and makes alive;

He brings down to the grave and brings up.

The fact that there are sorrows in this life, even for the righteous, is one of the key teachings of the Christian faith. There is not one page of Holy Scripture that does not mention the fact that the righteous suffer. Take up thy cross and follow me daily, Christ says. Christianity is not a religion of realized eschatology. Christianity is not a religion of health and wealth and pleasure. Christianity is not a religion that cries “peace, peace,” when there is no peace. Beloved, we are living in times of war, and I don’t mean the revolutions of earthly governments. Those will rise and fall like the rising and setting of the sun. Rather, we are fighting the war for the life of humanity, for the souls, and the very center of what it means to be human. Only Jesus Christ has succeeded in recovering the heart of humanity. If there is to be any joy, any love, any goodness in humanity, as long as we are human, then our joy must only be found in him. He is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! And in him we can have joy, in him we can sing the songs of Hannah, of Moses, of Mary, and the song of the Lamb, even while we struggle, and even while we mourn, we sing defiantly in the face of death, saying “O death, where is thy sting, O grave where thy victory?”

As St. Paul says, (2 Corinthians 4), “14 Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus...we faint not; but though our outward

man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. 17 For **our light affliction, which is but for a moment**, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; 18 While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Beloved, whatever your afflictions are in this life, the Holy Scriptures of God are reminding you that they are light. Your afflictions are light, not because they are not painful. Your afflictions are light, not because they are easy to bear, and indeed like Hannah they sometimes leave us with no choice but to pour our whole souls out like water before God. But, your afflictions are light, according to God’s holy word, simply because they are “for a moment.” They are momentary. The pains are but for a short time when compared to the eternal weight of glory that we will know on the last Day. The torments of this life, for those who bear them with faith and love and hope, are temporary, even to be compared to the “twinkling of an eye.” The sighings of the contrite heart are only for a season.

For, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in travail, hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

Beloved, let your pains in this life be given to God, let all pain be your participation in the death of Christ, a constant sign that you will soon and very soon, rise from the dead unto eternal life. Let the pangs of the body be birth pangs of heaven. Heaviness endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning. To know this by faith, is to have a foreknowledge of the joy that is to come. To know that joy even now, by faith, is to overcome the world, is to gain victory in every battle. Christ calls you to his altar now in the midst of a spiritual war. Come here and receive life in his body and blood. Here is the power of the resurrection, the strength you require in your earthly pilgrimage. Let us come and receive him by faith and let us resolve to season with spiritual salt all of the trials we are to face in the week to come, trusting in Christ's promise that he is with us, and if Christ is with us, then who can be against us? In the name...