

“Behold, I make all things new” – Sam Filby

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Rejoice *always*, pray *without* ceasing, give thanks in *all* circumstances.” So says our reading from the First Epistle to the Thessalonians. It is almost a banality to say that there are times when rejoicing in God is easier than others. It is easier, of course, when things go well for us. The Book of James tells us that every good and perfect gift is from the Lord, and it is when we receive said gifts that rejoicing and thankful prayers happen. This seems quite reasonable—if someone gives you something good, a positive response to the giver is entirely appropriate.

But what some of the Scriptures do that is particularly frustrating—at least for me—is add annoying universals, such as *always* and *all*, which are present in our Thessalonians reading. Personally, it is much easier for me to give thanks when I’d like to and when it is convenient for me, rather than *always* and in *all circumstances*. And sometimes it is not just inconvenient to give praise and thanks, but downright strange—like when we suffer.

What are we to make of the idea of rejoicing and being thankful in situations in which we, or those we love, suffer? When we suffer, we often pray in lament. Perhaps we are saddened or angered at God. But being thankful and rejoicing in the face of suffering seems almost absurd. More often than not, our minds are not aimed towards praising God when we suffer. Instead of praise, perhaps something like the problem of pain begins to arise: why would a loving God allow this to happen?

As I have on my preacher’s hat rather than my philosopher’s hat, I do not intend to offer arguments as to how an all-powerful and all-loving God would allow evil to exist in our world. When real suffering happens to us and to those we love, philosophical twaddle, as Dan Howard-Snyder calls it, is not always the most helpful or appropriate response. Indeed, our texts also do not intend to do such philosophical work. Instead, they offer a much richer response: they remind us of the story that we are a part of, and the end of that story. They remind us that our hope is our Lord, who will one day restore our world and make all things right again.

Let us turn to our Gospel texts. Here we find John the Baptist, a witness to the Light that is Christ Jesus—a witness who cries out from the wilderness. Now, *the wilderness* is one of those big-ticket theological items that we should pay attention to. The Baptist stories in the Gospels have John in the wilderness as a fulfillment of prophecies involving the wilderness. For example, Isaiah 40:3 reads: “*a voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’*” Remember that the prophetically envisioned return from Exile and restoration of Israel are seen as harbingers of the Messianic Age. Thus, the wilderness that led to the Exile is the same wilderness that is traversed as the Exile is reversed, and Israel will be restored—in other words, it will be made right again, it will be made anew. The wilderness, then, not only connects the Old Testament to the New by fulfillment of prophecy, but also serves as a reminder of the imperfect world we currently live in, waiting for the Messiah that will make our world anew. John the Baptist waited for the Messiah, as we, in this season of Advent, also anticipate His return.

We, like John, are in the wilderness. We suffer in an unrestored world. Recently, the brokenness of this world has hit me in a new way when a young man came to my school's campus and murdered one of my peers. I remember distinctly a friend running into my arms and weeping. Until that moment, the brokenness of the world had always felt distant—something that intellectually I knew existed, but had not felt on an emotional level. Even though we are deeply saddened by such atrocities, they are also familiar to each of us. We have all experienced the intense suffering that comes with loss. And it is in such situations that thanks and praise to God are particularly hard. What is our hope in these situations?

The children's Bible School answer is, of course, Jesus. And while this is true, it is important to find out what we mean when we say it is true. I do not think our hope is in the idea that "this is all part of God's plan." On the day of the shooting, I remember being heartbroken not just from the atrocious violence and tragedy of the event, but also from fellow students who claimed that we should be comforted in knowing that God took the life of our fellow student for a reason. That murder and death are somehow part of God's plan both is outrageous and false. Throughout the Scriptures it is made clear that such suffering is not part of God's plan.

I suggest that our hope—or at least part of it—is that, in a way, we know how our story is going to end: with God making all things right again. This is made clear in our readings for today. Psalm 126 tells us that, in the restored world, we will be like those who dream. Those who once wept will reap with shouts of joy, and our mouths will be filled with laughter. Isaiah 61 tells us that God will bring good news to the oppressed, comfort those who mourn, and restore what has been destroyed. We are making straight the road for the Lord so that He may restore our world again.

The fact that our world is broken and that God promises to renew it is an assurance that it is not how He wants the world to be. Maybe we do not know why intense suffering exists in the world, but we do know that the presence of such suffering is not how God wants the world to be. Theologian David Bentley Hart suggests that the way in which we can give thanks when we see suffering and death is by acknowledging that this is not the way that God wants the world. When we see evil and death, we do not see the face of God, but rather the face of His enemy. We can give thanks to God that this is not how He wants the world to be, and rejoice in the fact that He will one day make all things right again. Our God is perfectly good and shows no shadow of turning, as James tells us. This means that God's love for us will not change—it will ever be perfect, and as such we can rest assured in knowing God's promise of restoration will be brought about. Our Thessalonians reading reminds us of this: "the one who calls us is faithful, and He will do this." As we make straight the way for the Lord in the wilderness, it is in Him, and the promise of restoration that He will bring, that our hope resides.

I cannot speak for practically any amount of time without referencing a novel, so it would be quite uncharacteristic of me if I did not reference a novel today. It is practically my duty to do so. In *The Return of the King*, the final volume of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, there is a beautiful scene when Samwise Gamgee wakes up after thinking he had died. Not only that, but by his side is his friend Gandalf, whom he had thought to be dead as well. "Gandalf!" Samwise says in surprise, "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead. Is everything sad going to come untrue?"

Now, we could spend quite some time discussing Christian themes in *Lord of the Rings*. And while I do not know what Tolkien had in mind when he wrote this scene, the idea of everything sad coming untrue is a profoundly Christian hope—not just that good things will happen, but that sadness will come untrue. This does not mean forgetting the evil that has happened, but a removal of evil from the world. It does not mean that the world was never imperfect, but that it will be restored. It does not mean that death will never have happened, but that Christ has defeated death, and it will be no more.

As we wait in this Season of Advent, we are reminded that the light shines in the darkness, and that the darkness did not, does not, and will not overcome the light; we await the day when everything sad will come untrue. We await the day that John speaks of in his Revelation, when God will dwell among us, and He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And there will be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain, for the first things will have passed away. And God will sit upon His throne and say to us, “Behold! I make all things new.”