

“Take Heart...”

“But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Discouragement is difficult to overcome. I recently began reading a book by historian Eddie Glaude entitled, “Begin Again.” In this literary reflection, Glaude explores author James Baldwin’s experience as a leader in the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. As Glaude details Baldwin’s work, he illustrates how each victory in the movement was met with such vitriol and violence that Baldwin ultimately died in despair and disillusionment about the prospect of racial reconciliation in the United States. This depiction was difficult to read and often left me feeling hopeless about the current state of race relations in America. I was ready to give up on the book, but a couple of weeks ago I decided to continue reading, hoping I would find a reason for optimism in its concluding chapters. And then Sunday hit, and I woke up to the news that on Saturday, a hate-filled teenager had entered a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, and killed ten people simply because of the color of their skin. “Discouragement” to say the least.

When you take the cultural chaos connected to wildfires and war, mass shootings and baby formula shortages, inflation and COVID, and pile onto it the losses that seem ever-present in our own lives, it’s easy to become calloused to the confusion and numb to the suffering that surrounds us. It feels like the world is falling apart, and with such a constant supply of tragedies unfolding in front of our eyes, it’s difficult to find reason for hope. And this is a truth that even Jesus recognized.

In the final verse of today’s Gospel reading, Jesus told His disciples: “In the world, you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). The Greek word translated here as “tribulation” shows up 45 times in the New Testament and it’s rendered in a variety of ways. It can mean affliction or anguish, or persecution or oppression, or distress or trouble, and not one of these words is very comforting! Yet, this statement from Jesus is one to which we can all relate.

We gather today as bruised and battered believers, trying hard to make sense of a sinful world that continues to unravel. And in the shadow of these repeated reversals this is what Jesus says, “In this world, you will have trouble and affliction and anguish and persecution and oppression and distress.” Doesn’t feel like a very uplifting or encouraging message from the Messiah. Yet, if you think about what’s really happening in our world, nation, community, congregation, and even in our own families, then there could be no more fitting words for us because the truth Jesus speaks is undeniable: In the world we have tribulation.

As we consider the application of these words for us today, it’s important to understand that Jesus spoke these words to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. And He made this statement to a group of followers who had seen Him do amazing miracles; to people who had heard His teaching, and witnessed His compassion, and been awed by His power, and if anyone should have been strong in their faith and confident in their Savior it was these disciples. And yet, Jesus knew them – just as He knows us – and He knew that as soon as tribulation came they would scatter and that He would be betrayed; that soon He would be arrested and tried, beaten and crucified, and that these men, so bold and optimistic in their commitments to Him, would abandon Him in His greatest hour of need. And in these men, we should see ourselves.

We are tempted every day by a troubled world that is quickly passing away. And, every day, we are locked in a battle for our very souls, and when we are faced with hatred and abuse, hunger and suffering, unfaithfulness and disrespect, betrayal, greed, deceit, sickness and death, it is very natural for us to throw up our hands and throw in the towel and walk away. We understand this! And, in truth, it is emotionally exhausting to watch people struggle. And it is spiritually discouraging to see evil win the day. And in these moments, the Word of God can seem frail, and the promises of God can appear empty, and it is here that temptation comes. You see, the enemy would love to see us reject the revelation of a God who created and redeemed us, who loves and calls us, who desires for us to experience life in abundance and eternally, so temptation hits, and doubt gains a hold, and despair seems to win. And yet, in these moments of tribulation, when the Word seems weak and the heart is broken, the promises of God are most meaningful to us, and they are words we most need to hear.

On the night of betrayal, the disciples of Jesus were about to experience affliction, anguish, distress, and trouble like never before. Their faith was about to undergo a vicious attack from Satan, and all of their best efforts and good intentions were going to fail them. On the edge of such intense temptation and immense uncertainty, Jesus spoke to them honestly about the tribulation of this world, and then He gave them what they most needed to hear. He promised them that no matter what trouble the world would throw at them, and no matter how dark the path would become in front of them, and no matter how desperate they would feel, they could “take heart” because He had “overcome the world.” And, my friends, this is the same promise that Jesus is making to you today!

Today, in Christ Jesus, God promises that nothing can separate you from His love. And today, in Christ Jesus, God has promised you that He is the way and the truth and the life. Today, in Christ Jesus, God has promised you that He will be with you always; that you need not be afraid; that He will send His angels with you and prosper your way; that He is your refuge and strength, and the rock of your salvation; that, in Christ Jesus, God is faithful, and He will deliver you and give you life! Today, in Jesus Christ, all of these promises from God are found in His definite declaration that – for you – He has overcome the world!

These promises of God were first made to you in your Baptism, and my friends, this was not a one-time occurrence, rather, it is an ongoing and continual promise for your journey. Each life in this room looks a little different and no two crosses are exactly the same. We know that “in the world (we) will have tribulation.” About this we have no choice and, as we heard in today’s Gospel reading, God did not promise to take the trouble away – but, in Christ, He promised that the world would not prevail, and this is a promise to you that Jesus died to keep.

There is not one of us here today who can stand on our own. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But as we acknowledge our weakness and name our need, God meets the trouble of this world head on with the wonderful assurance that in Christ Jesus He has cleansed us of our sin, and delivered us from death, and – in the blood of our Savior – the world has been overcome once and forever. And, my friends, because this is true, you can take heart, and you can go forth with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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