

Sermon Title: “*Comfort and Joy*”

Series: *Learn, Live, Lead*

Speaker: Pastor Damian Mericka

Text: Matthew 5:4

## Introduction

*“Stand firm, and you will win life.” -Luke 21:19*

We began this year with a look at what Kingdom endurance is. ***Standing Firm*** here means *Endurance* and is a very rich word embodying an ***upward, consistent, contagious, and outward*** motion that goes against the current. *It is swimming upstream after Jesus.* We saw this is the work the Spirit of God does in our lives, just as He did in Jesus’ - He leads us upward to higher ground and a higher life in Him.

We also looked at some of the outward challenges we face when going upward with the Spirit, including the spiritual forces of darkness which our on their way downward. As they are being cast out of God’s Kingdom, we are being brought in. This is the nature of our Spiritual Battle. Unlike the generations that came before Jesus since His Ascension the Spirit has now come upon us to take the battle to where it truly is at.

What does this look like lived out in or lives? Following Jesus as His Disciples.



*“Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.”*

**-Matthew 4:19**

This series is set to be a journey answering this question- *what does it mean to follow Jesus?* How do we today answer His invitation and see this journey with Him unfold as it did for the first-generation followers of Jesus? Together we will discover anew what it means to follow Jesus- *to be a disciple making disciples culture that **learns, lives, and leads!***

### **I. An Invitation to Mourn (Matthew 5:4)**

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” -Matthew 5:4*

What a verse to kick off the Advent season with, right? An invitation to mourn? The title of this message is *Comfort and Joy*, and while we all long for the comfort and joy of the Lord for our lives the road to experiencing this is that of sorrow. ***Mourn*** in the Greek means more than just feeling bad- *it is to lament or be in anguish.* In context this means to lament the state our world is in because of sin- all that it has brought to us and in all the ways it touches us.

The invitation to mourn falls upon ears that may have become calloused to the way the world is. Everyday we see a world of brokenness, betrayal, disease, and death. When such fruit touches our lives, we mourn. We lament the loss of our first pet, or the loss of someone we love. We cry when disease touches us or someone we love, changing the trajectory of life plans or goals. We experience the anguish of being lied to by someone we trusted, hurt by someone we poured in to, or discouraged when not chosen for a team or promotion. We can lose heart where injustice reigns and the poor, suffering, or neglected continue to be marginalized and forgotten.

However, if we are not careful, we become calloused to where it hurts a little less each time. We look to be temporarily distracted with entertainment, drugs, or alcohol rather than be healed. I am always amazed at the resilience of our foster children and their emotional and physical pain tolerance. They build this tolerance from an instinct we all share- *survival*. We lose the expectation that things will ever change, so we instead lament the death of hope and embrace the broken as all that life truly is and ever will be. We all have this survival mechanism in us.

Jesus came to reset that. In His invitation to mourn, Jesus is inviting us to feel the pain of what sin has brought- to remember what it was like when our hearts were first wounded- how deep, painful, and life changing it was. Does He do this to pour salt and cause us more pain? No. Jesus does this in order to do what only God can do. ***Heal us. Bring us comfort.***

***Comfort***, on the very surface, in the Greek means to *call us close and console*. As we go deeper with this term, it is being drawn to Him to experience His embrace; receive His encouragement and strength. There is a sense of urgent appeal; Jesus calls us to bring our lament to Him, experience His embrace and know His encouragement and strength. This is the first step toward healing- the healing He alone brings to us and this world.

Yet before God can heal us, before He can bring this *comfort* and ultimately *joy* into our lives, He invites us to recognize that this world is going contrary to His created purpose for it. He Himself mourns in lamentation what sin has brought into our lives, and ultimately what it cost Him to bring deliverance and healing for us from it. Each of our laments, in our own circumstances, joins in the Divine lament as God's arm comes around us in a shared grievance over sin. This, however dear Saint, is not the end but the beginning. *Our tears lead into His Comfort and Joy; our mourning leads into the arms of Christ!*

## **II. Rachel's Tears- An Illustrated Journey of Mourning toward Comfort & Joy.**

### **A. Rachel's tears over death in childbearing**

*“Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had a hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear, for you have another son.’ And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (That is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day.” **-Genesis 35:16-20***

Jacob had just experienced a very intimate time with the Lord, wrestling Him all through the night in ways that forever changed him. It was here in Bethel, that Jacob while fleeing for his life after having set his hand to deception was met by God who loved Him not for what he had done, but what God had chosen to pour into him through Grace. Years later Jacob returns to this place called Bethel and encounters God again who affirms the promise of Abraham will flow through him- again not because of any merit in Him, but because of God's faithfulness in keeping His promises.

Jacob leads his family now away from **Bethel**, which means *house of God* toward **Ephrath**, which means *ash heap; place of fruitfulness*. This place Ephrath would later be called **Bethlehem**, which means *house of bread (food)*. Yet before they arrive at Ephrath, the journey is interrupted with labor pains at a place called **Ramah** which means *hill*.

Rachel now is in labor with her last son, Benjamin. You will remember Rachel was greatly loved by Jacob over her sister he had been tricked into marrying (another sermon for another day!) and their first son together was Joseph (think: colorful coat / saved the family and nation of Egypt- again, another sermon for another day). Yet here, the labor was different than it had been for Rachel with Joseph. It was soon realized in her motherly heart that though the child may live, she will not. Her journey in this life with the man she loves and the children she has born will soon draw to a close.

In this place where the caravan stops to the cries of birth pangs, Jacob awaits as midwives frantically do all that they can to keep mom comforted and focused. As her final push and last breath come forth, Rachel calls the child **Ben-oni**, which means *son of my sorrow*. Understand, this was not Rachel upset or angry at the child, blaming him for her death, but was the honest, transparent heart cry between a woman and her God. These were **Rachel's tears** over what sin has cost her- the joy of continuing as a wife and mother in life. Not her sin in particular, but the general fruit of sin that touches us all- death.

Yet in this moment of incredible heart ache and loss, Jacob redeems the child who has brought him renewed life at the cost of life. He names him **Benjamin**, which means *son of the right hand*.

Let's put this all together. As Jacob left the *house of God* (Bethel) with the promises of God on his way to Ephrath, the place of *fruitfulness out of ashes*, life causes him to stop at *Ramah*, where He looks toward God's fulfillment of promise; on this hill He experiences God's comfort in hope. It was in this place Jacob could have become calloused; yet he gave his mourning to God, who redeems it with the son of his right hand (Benjamin) and out of these ashes Jacob is led into a place of fruitfulness. ***It wasn't the destination but the journey that brought comfort and joy out of the ashes life brought to him along the way!***

**Ramah**, a hill where one could look toward Bethlehem, would stand as a reminder of this mourning that was comforted with a pillar of Rachel. This would be a reminder that this world

does not function as God designed it, and an invitation to mourn with genuine, transparent lamenting with the Creator who mourns with us and brings us His comfort.

*B. Rachel's Tears (symbolically over the loss of sons to Babylon)*

*“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’ For the Lord has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. **I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.** I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the Lord.”*

**-Jeremiah 31:10-14**

We can understand how God would bring comfort to Jacob in the tragic loss of his wife; while Jacob was not perfect he didn't really do anything to bring this upon himself or Rachel. But, what about any of us who choose sin for our lives and bear the weight of consequence. Is there hope for us? What if we are the source, through our actions, bringing brokenness, pain, suffering in the lives of others through our own selfishness, unfaithfulness, deception, etc?

The words we are reading from the prophet Jeremiah come to the Nation of Israel, the very children descended from Jacob, who had long abandoned God to live for themselves. Without God's blessing, they were hurting themselves and others to the point of grieving God and bringing His discipline into their lives. These words of promised comfort and joy come to those whose children were either slaughtered or carried away under the Babylonian invasion. While Rachel died and her son lived, Israel would have mothers living whose children are lost.

How can God speak *comfort and joy* when their own actions have brought the misery they are mourning? Understand dear Saint, God calls them to mourn with Him. In this embrace He **turns** their mourning into joy, meaning *He redeems and changes it so completely one is swallowed up by the other*. Further, **giving them gladness** for sorrow means *they will rise up in joy or raise their hallelujah amidst the sorrow*. This is God's **comfort** to them because He feels what they feel, He **hears** their mourning!

*“Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.’ Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.”* **-Jeremiah 31:15-17**

It is here we come to understand that God hears our mourning. Ramah is a hill about 5 miles north of Jerusalem overlooking toward Bethlehem which was 6 miles south of Jerusalem. The

direction for ***weeping to stop*** is not because God does not want to hear it; actually, that is the furthest thing from the truth! David wrote,

*“You have kept count of my tossings, put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”*  
-Psalms 56:8

God has heard, and as we mourn with Him, our mourning must not swallow us up to where it is not comforted. ***Refusing to be comforted*** comes from the root of feeling guilty to be relieved when another is suffering, is gone, or our situation has not changed. God is saying our mourning accomplishes something very intimate, precious, and powerful with Him. We must understand, only God can heal our wounds that bring the fruit of mourning within us. And God does! *He promises that Rachel will be reunited with her children!* Like Jacob, this generation of his descendants must stand on this *hill of mourning* and choose to embrace God’s promises for their lives as they look toward the hope in He who alone can fulfill and bring these promises to pass. Nothing in this world can heal the pain in our lives but God Himself. *Let us bring our mourning to Him on this hill of Ramah.*

### *C. Rachel’s Tears (Symbolically over the loss of sons at the Birth of Jesus)*

*“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”* **-Matthew 2:16-18**

Now we come to the season of Advent, and the Christ Child is here. His birth caught the attention of the Jewish king under Roman authority, Herod, and he sought to slaughter all who were within distance of the place Jesus was to be born- Bethlehem. Historically, it is believed the number of sons who dies from this ranged from 10-30 children. It is here the cries of Rachel symbolically reach out unto the ears of the Lord God Almighty.

Because of what God *brought* out from, *raised* up from, and will *accomplish* through the Son who was both born in Bethlehem and survived the effort of man and devil to stop. This was promised to Rachel and all who mourn through the prophet Micah.

*Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.* **-Micah 5:1-5**



We shall arise out of the ashes of what we are going through in this life by the bread of God, raising our hallelujah's amidst the season of sorrow from the hill of Ramah. Healing does not just await us fully when we arrive, we are healed along the way with each step we take with Him in this life.

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* **-John 6:51**

Further, Jesus said,

*"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."* **-Matthew 11:4-6**

Even those who were healed would one day die. *Rachel is still weeping; her lament has yet to be satisfied.* She and her children are yet to be reunited. We must understand that as wonderful as healing can be, ultimately it is a band aid to a greater need we all possess- eternal salvation from death to life. Rather, more than a band aid it is a shadow of what God can and is doing- making all things new! Yet today, there is still the need for a promise to be fulfilled.

*A promise is only of value if it is one day fulfilled. A promise that spans generations must be spoken and performed by one who is faithful unlike any other. Such a promise would be of greater value and worth than anything else this world could ever offer us. It would be greater than the situation it was given to us in, despite the depth of mourning we are in.*

### **III. Jesus Alone Brings Us Comfort and Joy!**

*"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."* **-2 Corinthians 1:20-22**

From the moment Jesus came into this world, every promise of God took on flesh and walked among us. *With His **Word***, He spoke life from death. *With His **Touch***, He restored what was lost to illness. *With His **Death, Burial, and Resurrection*** He declared eternal deliverance and freedom. *With His **Ascension*** to the Right Hand of the Father He has poured out His Spirit to continue this work of His Kingdom coming into this world one heart at a time through each of us who place faith in Him! And *with His **Return***, all things will be made new!

***Blessed are they that mourn*** is again our invitation today to grieve sin and its affects upon the world and us. It is an invitation to meet God on the hill of Ramah, at His bidding. It is here God meets us through His Son and in this shared lament His strength becomes ours as we look toward that ultimate day where every tear will be wiped away never to be shed again. It is here, in this shared mourning ***we will be comforted.***

*“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”*

**-1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’” **-Revelation 21:1-5***

Until we reach that eternal destination, let us move forward with His promises, bringing our sorrows to him on the hill of Ramah to mourn, feeling His embrace as He gives us His comfort and joy!

Rachel stands upon the hill Ramah weeping over the loss this world has cost her family. Tears that are not lost by God; He hears and mourns with her. She refuses to be comforted with empty words or become calloused to where each loss is not felt. As she looks toward Ephratah, the place that promised life from ashes, that city is renamed Bethlehem, place of bread, where Jesus comes from in order to bring Rachel and all of her children together, home. It is here promises are fulfilled, and every tear wiped away. It is here her mourning is comforted and turned to joy.

Join me in mourning this world.

Mourn what sin has cost us and those we love.

Mourn what sin continues to cost.

Meet with Jesus on this hill of Ramah, and allow Him in His embrace to comfort you.

Allow Him in His timing to restore what was lost, heal what is hurting, wounded, ill or dying.

Allow Him to resurrect what is dead- speaking life from death.

**Come to Jesus today for *Comfort and Joy!***