

## **“Praise, Pain, and Promise”**

Psalm 31:9-16; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11

Chan Willis – F.P.C.-L.C./Welsh

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Many of you know that I rarely saw an old expression I didn't like. One that  $\gg$  came to mind recently was *“These are the times that try men's souls.”* (Thomas Paine, political activist American Revolution, author “Common Sense”). As we hear each and every day of the increasing losses of human life with even greater ones to come, and the tremendous strain put on overwhelmed healthcare heroes, an overburdened economy, and an overanxious population, these are indeed dark times for our nation... ones that definitely ‘try the souls’ of men, and women...

As we give thought to how we are to respond to these ‘trying times,’ during which so many of our countrymen and women are also seeking to find their way in this ‘present darkness,’ another saying came to mind (which might be familiar): **“It is far better to light a (the) candle than to curse the darkness.”** These words have been attributed to, among others, Eleanor Roosevelt, Confucius, Oliver Wendell Holmes, J.F.K., and my personal favorite, that voice from the ‘Peanuts’ gallery, Charles Schulz. The earliest appearance, however, appears to be in a 1907 collection of sermons by a British minister **William L. Watkinson**. The particular message from which this quote came was entitled “The Invincible Strategy,” which **“downplayed the value of verbal attacks on undesirable behaviors and championed the importance of performing good works.** (Hmmm... sounds like a message many of our state and federal governmental leaders could use a copy of...) Watkinson showed his humility, and wisdom, when he was quoted as saying just before the Lord called him home @ 87 “I keep on learning how ignorant I am

Regardless, You may have taken note that in today's Scriptures relative to Jesus' ‘Palmy’ entrance into Jerusalem, I chose to focus more on O.T. (Hebrew) Scriptures than the N.T. (Greek/Gentile) Scriptures. That comes for a couple of reasons: For one, it is the prophetic words and events in the OT that the Jesus of the NT, in his own words, **‘came to fulfill.’** There are deep and rich parallels between the lives of God-followers in the times of the ancient Israelites and those of Jesus-followers of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The spiritual life of NT believers was built on a foundation laid by OT fathers and mothers of the faith.

Secondly, there is a much greater depth to the characters of the Old Testament. We get much greater insights into their struggles, their relationships, their personalities. We see them at their best AND their worse. What was good and strong about them, and what was bad and weak in their lives. The ways that they rejoiced and were glad for the hand dealt them by God, and how they would be angry and resentful of their experiences. In short, we can appreciate how prophets like Isaiah and the Psalmist/King David both '**cursed the darkness**' AND '**lit a candle**' in their walk with the Lord. Much as Jesus, the Light of the World, would begin this day a week-long journey of both deepest, dark sorrow and shining, victorious joy. As we consider their stories of trials and triumphs of life, like them, may we grow in our ability to better navigate the ups-and-downs of our own lives... ones that encounter "**Praise, Pain, and Promise.**"

As we consider our lives 'BCV' (Before CoronaVirus), we were like Jesus on that first 'Palm Sunday.' Riding along life in style, much to the adulation and **praise** of all our adoring 'fans.' Confident that we were, in some small ways, seeking to 'be like Jesus'... striving to fulfill God's will and purpose for our lives. With regards to the LC church, we had just broken ground on our long-awaited building project. ('Building' in more ways than one!) Personally speaking, between that excitement, and the wonderful people and ministries in Welsh, I could have worn with pride one of those famous t-shirts: "LIFE IS GOOD."

And then, along came 'COVID.' 'Big, bad COVID.' And then, in a matter of weeks... seems like DAYS... our lives have drastically changed. In what seems like the 'blink of an eye,' We have moved from readily singing "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" to 'I walk in the Garden ALONE." Borrowing from some old rock n roll lyrics, we went from being a 'free bird' to 'free falling.' As Christians, we have gone from regular practices to build our **faith**, to quite irregular ones that instead work to build our **fear**. Sometimes, it can be very hard to shout our praises to God, when all we feel like doing is shouting out in **PAIN**.

But one of the things I got out of David's words in Psalm 31 is that to give God a 'shout out'... in a NOT-so-complimentary way... is OK! Let's remember some things about the GREAT 'Poet Laureate for God' and Leader David. One is that of those 150 Psalms... which we use so often to being our time of PRAISE and worship... more than HALF of them are Psalms of

LAMENT! David had NO PROBLEM voicing his anger, his frustration, his fear, his failings, to God. He was upfront, HONEST with God about his struggles. And therefore, so should we!

Now, we can say, well, that's David. He was one of God's great leaders. Well, guess what. As much as David was a 'saint,' he was also a SINNER. A murderer... an adulterer. AND YET, God used him in powerful ways, and continues to, through his writings and his examples... both good and bad. Which means, that same God can use flawed sinners like you and me to ALSO be great leaders for the cause of Christ. But to be used by God to our fullest potential, we must be open, HONEST, with God... in strength, and weakness.

I think that we might do well to 'plagiarize' David's opening words in this passage. To humbly come before God and say, "***Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. <sup>10</sup>For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.***" (Psalm 31:9-10)

We serve a 'big, big God.' One who is there not just to hear our praises, but our pain. To be open enough to God to cry out, 'God, give me your grace, cause I a hurting. I don't understand what's happening. I'm scared. I greive for all these selfless servants who are risking their own health, and their loved ones, for perfect strangers.' There are times... like now... when we must share in Paul's declaration of lament: "***Lord, I believe. Help my UN-belief.***"

Friday I mentioned borrowing words of prayer from a colleague I heard... that would be two faith leaders I saw on TV earlier that morning: Rabbi Shai Held, and Episcopalian Bishop Michael Curry. Hmm... a rabbi, a priest, and a Pres. Minister go into a bar... ANYWAY, Rev. Curry reminded us all that what is most important in our conversations... PRAYERS... to God is to be HONEST. That God can 'handle the truth.' He knows anyway. But we sometimes THINK we can hide our true feelings from Him. But we're just fooling ourselves. A true friend is one we can share both our joys and our sorrows with. Like, 'what a friend we have in Jesus'...

And what is it that enables us to be vulnerable enough in our 'friendship' with Jesus, our relationship with God, to admit our fears and our failing. Because **we believe in God's PROMISES**. The promises of Scripture found in the words of faithful, flawed disciples just like you and me. Because we can resonate with a fellow sinner like David when he declares "***I trust***

*in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God.<sup>15</sup> My times are in your hand; deliver me... <sup>16</sup>Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love."* (Psalm 31:14-16)

It is this very same trust in the saving, steadfast love of God that sustained and inspired the prophet Isaiah to proclaim that ***"I KNOW that I will not be put to shame; he who vindicates me ('saves me') is near. It is the Lord God who helps me."*** (Isaiah 50:7-9)

But we mustn't stop there, with those ancient followers of the One True God. No, we must go to the One who most tangibly and completely fulfills the promise of God's 'help and salvation': God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. As we ponder the trials and tribulations that we, and so many of our countrymen... and indeed, sisters and brothers around the world... have endured in just a matter of weeks, may we also consider what suffering, anguish, and ultimately, death that Christ will endure in just a matter of DAYS. May you and I hear Paul speaking not only to a church in Philippi, but in Lake Charles, and Welsh, and beyond...

***"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... who, though he was in the form of God..."*** (Hmmm... like us humans, who were ***"created in God's image.. the 'form of God'?"***)... ***"did not consider equality with God something to be exploited ('taken advantage of'), or "grasped" ('held on to')... "but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness."*** 'Fully God?' Yes. 'Fully human.' Also Yes. Able to experience life in every way like we do. Its joys... and its sufferings. Its pleasures... and its pain. PAIN that exceeded ANY that we might have to endure when Jesus ***"became obedient to death – even death on a cross."*** (Phil. 2:5-8) Yes, a death even more excruciating and heart-breaking as those being suffered today in hospitals across this land, and world...

It is ONLY by holding on to the promises of God, that by trusting in Jesus as our only Lord and Savior, we do not need to fear death, no matter when or how it may come. Even as we struggle with human doubts and fear, may we yet declare, as David did, ***"I trust in you, O Lord. You are my God. You will save me with your steadfast love."*** (Ps. 31:14, 16) May we have that same 'blessed assurance' that Isaiah did: ***"I know that I will not be put to shame... (for) it is the Lord God who helps me."*** (Isa. 50:7,9) May we be given ***"the same mind that was in Christ Jesus"***... who through his humility and obedience, would be, in the end, ***"highly exalted,"*** and given ***"the name above all names."*** As you and I call upon that 'name above all names'...

**JESUS... in the end, we too will be 'highly exalted.'**

I began with that quote from a British preacher at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. **"It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness."** While the truth of this statement is timeless, and is just as true over 100 years later, may we know that this can be a 'both/and' as well as an 'either/or.' There are times when our humanity is weak, and we will 'curse the darkness.' But even as we do, may we never forget how to 'turn on the light.' By going to the source which will never fail you. The Light of the World, Jesus Christ. For if these are the times that 'TRY men's souls'... JESUS is the only One to SAVE those souls...

**Benediction (Psalm 130, Romans 8):**

**We are a people loved by God. We will live as signs of this love.**

**We are a people blessed with hope. We will live in light of this hope.**

**May the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the courage of the Spirit, strengthen our faith and set us loose to share God's love and mercy with all.**

**...In ALL the ways that you are given opportunities this week to share God's love and mercy with one another, KNOW that you do not labor...**

**(This Prayer was given by EP Rev. Ron Sutto, from Church of Scotland. At a recent teleconference of the Presbytery of South LA. It was so meaningful to me, I decided to use it for the Palm Sunday service Prayer Time. I hope you will share in my assessment...}**

**In our hour of need we turn again to you, for we have nowhere else to turn.**

**We put our faith in you, because you have proved your faithfulness time and again. We reaffirm our love for you because you have never let us go.**

**We thank you that you are not distant from us, but have drawn near, in your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. He has shared our life, tasted our death and defeated it; He understands our worries and our fears. Help us to respond as your children now. We pray for this pandemic spreading across our world, Remembering all who have lost loved ones, and praying for those seriously ill at**

**this time. We pray for doctors and nurses and all in the caring professions,  
Who work to help and support people as best they can.**

**We remember those working behind the scenes—testing samples, confirming  
results, giving information to patients. We uphold those who are trying to  
better understand this virus, working to create an effective remedy.**

**We pray for our governments in Washington, Baton Rouge, and all local  
parishes and towns, as they work with the best medical advice to guide us on  
how we should respond, and what action we should take.**

**May this crisis bring out the best in us, not the worst. Help us to live by faith  
and not by fear; to build bridges, not barriers; and resist all who would speak ill  
of any other group. May we not forget our responsibility to one another,  
especially to the vulnerable and voiceless in our communities.**

**Help us to find ways of keeping in touch and offering reassurance for any who  
feel particularly vulnerable, or in danger at the present. As the virus spreads, we  
pray for the disruption it causes to normal life, bringing new fears and anxieties:  
we pray for those who have been laid off as their work disappears; may  
congregations find new ways of living through this time. May we not forget our  
faith, but draw strength from it. So, may our worship be heartfelt,**

**Our fellowship deepen, and our service increase. God of grace and mercy,  
Hear our prayers. Strengthen us by your Spirit, so that: we may carry on our  
lives as best as we are able, looking out for others, showing love in action, being  
faithful in prayer, and bringing encouragement, hope, and peace;**

**Always trusting in you, our Rock and our Redeemer.**

**These prayers we bring to you in Jesus' name. AMEN.**