



Pain and Joy: God Is At Work In Us
A Sermon on John 15:1-10

Sunday, April 29th ~ 5th Sunday Of Easter
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The Bible has many passages about pain. Take, for instances, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar was a young mother when she and her son, Ishmael, were told that they were no longer welcome to live with Sarah and Abraham. In fact, the two of them were kicked out, told to get out and never come back. They had only one bottle of water between the two of them when they were forced out into the inhospitable desert. When the water was gone Hagar laid her fragile and dehydrated son beneath the shade of a bush. She then moved a little ways off knowing that the darkness of death had come for them and couldn't watch her son slip from this life to the next. The physical and emotional pain she had experienced, knowing her child was dying and she could do nothing, about it must have been horrific.

The Bible also has many passages about discomfort. The entire Israelite nation experience discomfort together. After they had been freed from slavery, they were out wandering the desert with Moses at their lead. The trouble was they didn't have much in the way of food or water. They began to complain to Moses about their miserable condition. They even went so far as to say it would be better for them if they were back in Egypt. There they had bread and meat to eat. Out in the desert, we have nothing. For a time, Snickers, the candy, ran some commercials about being "hangry." Hangry is a combination of hunger and anger. The marketers rightfully knew that when people don't eat they get angry. So they said when someone is "hangry" give them a Snickers and they'll be back to normal, happy and comfortable. Moses didn't have and food, let alone, any Snickers to give out, so an entire nation was in discomfort. They were hangry people.

Within in the Bible there are many passages about joy. Paul and Barnabas were two missionary buddies who traveled together. Their mission was to share the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone they came across. It wasn't easy for them, but they never gave up. No matter where they when or how things were going both of them found great joy in what they were doing because they were living out God's call upon their lives.

There are also stories about comfort in the Bible like the one where God comforted the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a person appointed by God to watch over the Israelites. This was no easy task because the Israelites had been doing as they pleased. They were caught in the culture around them and embraced those values. Jeremiah tried to warn them not to be distracted by worldly stuff, but the Israelites wouldn't listen. So God came to Jeremiah and promised to him the God would bring the Israelites back and that God would always be with them no matter what. God's promise was one of comfort.

Maybe you resonate with one of these passages because you see yourself in them. Maybe you're suffering the pain of watching a child or loved one wilt before you. Maybe you've suffering the discomfort of having little or nothing, coming up short at the end of the month or falling behind on your taxes. May God be with you as you endure pain and discomfort.

Or maybe you have experienced profound joy in sharing your understanding of God's sustaining love with other people. Maybe you have been comforted by God as God has drawn you back in after a time away and filled you with a peace that words can't express. Praise be to God for joy and comfort.

We all know that pain and discomfort are part of life. So, too, is joy and comfort. We are confronted with that reality in the Gospel of John. The 15th chapter begins with a word of pain and discomfort "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes..." I know that plants can't speak. I'm not sure if plants have feelings, but I imagine if they did they would cry out when the pruning tools were taken out of the shed. To "prune" is to cut away dead or fruitless branches. The reason pruning is done is because it actually helps the plant flower more or produce more fruit. I'm not a botanist so pruning doesn't make sense to me, but ask any gardener and they'll tell you that "deadheading" a plant is a good thing because it helps the plant to flourish. If you could ask a plant I'm certain they'd tell you its painful.

That is the point Jesus is making in this chapter. When we are pruned, when the places of deceit, lies, pride, false humility, idolatry, and other unrighteousness are cut out of us by God it is painful. When you feel Jesus at work in you life, calling you from a fun, familiar place to a new place, which is inherently uncomfortable, that process can be difficult. But just like plants the pruning that happens in our lives helps us to bear more fruit.

There is also joy in this text. Jesus said "You have already been cleansed by the words I have spoke to you." (15:3) In Jesus, or as the text says, by abiding in Jesus, the guilt and penalty of our sin has been removed from us. Abiding in Jesus, and Jesus abides in us, we stand before God declared righteous, forgiven for our past wrongs, our present slip ups, and our future mistakes. It is in Jesus' words that we find immeasurable joy. We have been cleansed, our sin has been removed, we stand righteous before God. Praise be to God!

This passage doesn't stop with joy and comfort. There is in this passage an explicit charge to everyone who believes in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We are to "bear much fruit." This is now the second time God has commanded God's people to be fruitful. The first time is in Genesis chapter 1, while Adam and Eve were still in the garden of Eden. God told them to be fruitful. Now, in John, Jesus instructs us to bear fruit. Is producing fruit an inward thing? Yes, it has to do with personal devotional, reading the Bible, and praying. It also has to do with outward things. How we interact with the world, take care of creation, and honor and love one another. Producing fruit happens both inside of us and outside.

There are many passages in the Bible that speak directly to pain and discomfort. Hagar and Ishmael were in pain and God sent his holy host to help them and comfort them. If you are in pain this morning God's holy hosts are all around you, ready and willing to be with you in your pain. In discomfort God sent manna and pheasants to the Israelites for food. There are also many passages that speak to joy and comfort. Paul and Barnabas experienced joy and Jeremiah was comforted by God. John, chapter 15 contains both pain and joy. The pruning done by God is a painful process and happens in each season of life. The joy in this passage is that Jesus has already cleansed us and now we stand before God, having been declared righteous (justification).

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.