

“A Silver Lining”
(Phil 4:10-13; John 6; Psalm 19)

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Rev. J. Koyama

Living with Limitation

It has been a trying two years for everyone and I have a cartoon picture of Lucy made to look like a corona virus, holding the football for Charlie Brown with the words “reopening” written on it. That sort of sums it up for me. Every time we start to kick off a return to normalcy, Lucy pulls away the football. And now it does look like the latest spike is going down as quickly as it came up.

Part of what I think has been so wearing on us all is how isolated we feel by the on again, off again mandates. We have felt separated from the feeling of a more stable life that we once took for granted, an old “normal” that we longed to have restored, even as its memory begins to fade.

And so, a good bit of scripture to start our reflection with is Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which he wrote from prison. If you didn’t know he was in prison and longing to see his friends in the congregation, you would think by his words, that everything was going marvelously for him. His heart is overflowing with joy even in the midst of his separation.

The Apostle Paul writes from prison:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

(Philippians

4:11b-13)

In some ways, it seems as though, being in prison has itself brought this joy about for Paul. Sitting there in isolation, Paul has been having the experience we refer to when we say that, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” He has been thinking about the people in his life and has taken his feelings of connection with them, and the examples they have set, as a gift from God; a gift that has left him energized and inspired.

Silver Linings

So I guess, one way to look at where we are today is to ask whether we too, like Paul (who was able to find a silver lining in his imprisonment) can find a silver lining in the seemingly endless separation from “normalcy” that we are experiencing. What gift might God be holding out to us, that can free our hearts from the emotional prison that the pandemic threatens to keep us in?

In an odd way, I think that there may be a silver lining for us in the way the repeated dashing of our hopes that this would all be over, is showing us that there are limits to what technology can do for us.

Around the Radio

I remember a conversation I once had with my Dad about his days growing up as a Japanese Christian in Tokyo, during World War Two. He told me that classical music had a profound influence on his life. I knew this to be true because, although he was a terrible pianist, the sound of him banging away at fragments of Mozart and Chopin, provided a backdrop to my own childhood.

I asked him how it was possible for him to have acquired this early love for music. It was not as though they had stereo systems like we have today or a symphony orchestra he could buy tickets to in war-flattened Tokyo. He explained that there was a music program on the radio that he and his friends listened to. I said, "You mean like a transistor radio?" He laughed at the realization that such a small thing had such a profound effect on him.

I had to think about it for a minute. It must have been a tube radio, since portable transistor's were not invented until the 1950's. The

sound would have been much more scratchy and crackly than what we are used to. And yet, in those days it was a great pleasure, and he and his friends were captivated and filled with joy by what they heard.

The Downside of Having it All

We've come a long way since then. Scientists, inventors, manufacturers, and providers of every kind have made our lives safer and more comfortable on a scale unprecedented in human history. Take the automobile. Today's cars, with their high powered engines, AC, heated seats, and electric windows, make the cars of the 1940's look like go-carts.

And these developments with cars are only symbolic of everything else that has changed. Even now improvements are constantly being made in every area of life, all to provide us with the most painless, limitless and enjoyable possible journey through life. The whole project seems to have succeeded in making it possible for us to do more and suffer less than any generation in human history (Today we can even listen to news that is designed to relieve us of any "cognitive dissonance" we might experience. Because hearing what we don't want to hear is too painful and it will cause the customer to walk away).

I'm sure that there is much we have to be grateful for in these developments. But one thing seems clear to me. People who, like myself, have been fortunate enough to have enjoyed this tremendous burst of good fortune, appear to be less and less grateful and more and more irritable and demanding as time goes on. It is as though, the more we have, the more entitled we feel. The more we "thirst."

It turns out that the idea that we should be able to have everything we want, when we want it, the way we want it, is a poor recipe for character formation and does not lead to the contentment we seek.

Perhaps one silver lining in this pandemic is that, whether we like it or not, we are being forced to come to terms with the reality that no amount of technological innovation can shield us from the fact that life is also hard; that life delivers us into some form of suffering and limitation, whether we like it or not. And our "faith" remind us that there is a blessing that can be drawn from that suffering, depending on how we respond to it.

I know that for some who were living on the edge even before the pandemic began, it is hard to see a silver lining in still greater hardship. I cannot speak for them. And I know that there are many people of

character who have responded with grace and strength of character to this pandemic and will continue to do so, regardless of the twists and turns that come our way. I am also not speaking about them (other than to say that they are a source of hope and inspiration for us all).

But for those of us who have been the main beneficiaries of the American dream, and have come to behave as though any discomfort or inconvenience we face is an injustice and a personal affront, I think these deprivations come as a gift; an opportunity for life to reteach us the depth of character that comes with facing adversity gracefully.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans:

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

These words express the conviction that the hardships we face do not come to us without some blessing. But it is important that we respond with the capacity to endure. We must endure the temptation to lash out; to look first for an enemy to punish. And we must persevere in loving our neighbors as ourselves as Jesus did and trust, even if we

don't always feel it, that "our Father in heaven, who rewards us in secret", will do just that.

One of the things that I think is most important about Paul's letter to the Phillippians, is that he is joyful, in spite of the fact that he is still in prison. He is not holding out sullenly, waiting for the moment of his release, before rejoicing in what God is doing in his life. He is not spending his time hating the guards or resenting the people who put him there. In fact, his prison experience seems to have made his joy all the more intense.

Perhaps there is a similar silver lining for us as we continue to live under the restrictions imposed by the pandemic or any of the other associated hardships and inconveniences. Perhaps the pandemic can teach us more fully that the love God pours into human hearts doesn't have to wait for the conditions of our confinement to be lifted, but is available to us, all the more intensely, right now.

My guess is that Paul felt God's presence so intensely (as he thought of his friends in prison) because he didn't have much else available to him. Perhaps there was a mouse there in his cell that he could watch as it scurried about in the corner of the cell, a surprisingly wonderful creature in itself. And maybe it would also be true for us, that if we

had less available to us, we might actually be find greater happiness with less.

Notice that in Psalm 19, which Tim read to us, that every joyful thing that is expressed in that psalm, the sun that “like a bridegroom” makes its way across the sky, the invisible conversations that we have with God, that are inspired by our surroundings, all of it is absolutely free and available right now. None of it requires the acquisition of any new toys. But the power of these precious realities to inspire us is constantly overlooked, so absorbed are we as a society with the question of what to buy next to feather our nests.

My feeling is that we are entering into a time when the “American Dream”, that everyone should be able to enjoy ever increasing material prosperity, and generally enjoy life without limits has actually hit its limits and that we will have to learn how to live within lower expectations of what we must have in order to be happy.

On the one hand, that seems a threatening prospect. But on the other hand, it can be an invitation to our society to reduce its needs and thereby grow in spirit, instead of increasing its needs and thereby shrinking in spirit, as we have been doing.

I am a firm believer in the critical importance of science and technology, and I believe that pitting science and technology against religion is misguided. But I also do not think that science and technology is able to replace or recreate for us the true source of our wholeness. And that is what our religion points us to; to our relationship with God and through the love of God to our relationships with all of creation.

As a nation, we are people driven by thirst. We are thirsty because we have put our trust in material wealth, personal freedom, science and technology as the means to happiness. And the pandemic, by putting limitations on what these things can do for us, has only increased our thirst and the irritability that goes with it. So, perhaps the pandemic is doing us a favor by forcing us to seek out the authentic spiritual life, that Jesus promises. He is the bread of life, and the one who will finally quench that thirst.

We don't have to wait for the pandemic to be over to enjoy God's blessings. We don't have to wait for the political and cultural wars to cease. None of these things can stop God from pouring love into our hearts.

And it is entirely possible that we may experience God's blessing more intensely in the midst of our privations, the way a group of teenagers did, as they gathered around a little radio, amid the war devastated landscape of Tokyo in the late 1940's.

It seems to me as though we have two options. We can be like Jonah, who did his best to run from the life God set before him. He boarded a ship to a far away hiding place, because he did not want the pain of ministering to the hated Ninevites. But in spite of his every attempt to get away, he found himself in the belly of a whale that ended up spitting him up on the beach in front of the very difficult ministry setting that God had called him to in the first place.

That's one round about way. Another is that we can be like Paul and, instead of running and hiding from the inevitable hardships that come our way, we can aspire to live graciously in the midst of those very hardships, with hearts open to drinking deeply of whatever blessing God delivers, whatever the circumstance.