

“Freed For Good”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Do you remember the cartoon strip “Calvin and Hobbes?” In this one particular strip, the first frame finds Calvin on the playground swing. The school bully approaches and orders “Get off the swing, Twinky.” Calvin stands his ground. “Forget it, Moe. Wait your turn.” The second frame is just the big punch – shoes and stars and swing all over the place. The final frame finds Calvin in a beat-up heap, uttering his perspective, “It’s hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning.”

Calvin, has a point. It’s tough to believe when injustice, unfairness, undue suffering, and temptation come beating down your door and yet we hear these words of St. Paul in today’s second reading, often quoted, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” and I say, “Hmmm. Do all things for good for those who love God?”

Consider Isaac, Abraham’s son – the son of the promise, heir to all Abraham’s hopes. Then God’s word comes, “Abraham, take your son, your only son whom you love, and take him up the mountain to offer him in sacrifice.” can you imagine Abraham’s response? “Excuse me, Lord? Am I hearing you right? This is not a good thing, God.”

Yet Abraham takes Isaac up the mountain. When his young son points out that they have no animal for the sacrifice, Abraham has to explain that God will be providing the sacrifice. Abraham builds the altar, binds Isaac, lays him on the altar. One of the worst stories in the Bible. And yet we confess. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Then there’s Joseph. The Old Testament seems to have a lot to these interesting biblical characters. Sure, Joseph is a bit of a braggart, but is that a reason to conspire to kill him? My brothers, bug me sometimes, but I don’t want to kill them. Joseph’s brothers settler eventually on a lesser plan – selling him as a slave to Egypt. This is not a good thing, God. In Egypt Joseph rise to be head servant, only to have his master’s wife attempt to seduce him. He refuses, she accuses him of attacking her, and he’s thrown into prison.

And there are other stories. Saul throwing spears at David. Jonah sitting in the belly of a whale. Paul heading to Antioch with a warrant to arrest and kill any Christians he finds along the way. And still we confess. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

At times, these words sound a whole lot more like a platitude than a reality. You know, something we say when we don’t know what else to say – at the death of a child, the loss of a limb, a divorce, a natural disaster. “Every cloud has its silver lining...Into every life a little rain must fall, you know...All things work together for good for those who love God...”

It is precisely when we need the truth and power of this Word of God that it is hardest to believe it. “Oh, really?” we wonder. Do all things really work together for good for those who love the Lord?

Abraham was blessed in his obedience and Isaac remained faithful. Joseph was God’s tool to save Israel from devastating famine. Nineveh was spared because of and in spite of Jonah. And Paul met Jesus on that road to Damascus and changed the faith forever.

I sat with a dear friend a few years ago when she was sure the life and ministry as she knew it were over. There was no energy. There was no joy. And she knew, absolutely knew, she would not survive it. All things working together for good was lie. At best a naive lie, at worst a cruel lie.

But she made it through, stranger in some ways. And with a confession on her lips. That all things work together for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose. It wasn't a lie. The words just didn't make sense until she'd made it to the other side.

Friends, perhaps that is the greatest gift the stories of the Bible have to give us. They give us examples of how, time and time again, God has carried God's people in and through the very worst that life can throw at them and how God turns these times into redemption and salvation. The only way we can know the truth of this promise – hold on to the hope of this promise when everything around us is screaming "It's a lie!" – is to look back over our shoulder and say, "Yes, I remember when God saved it before. I remember when God turned defeat into victory. In the Bible. In my life."

Stated another way, "It is not God's will to get us into trouble. It is not God's will to get us out of trouble. It is God's will to get us through trouble."

Of course, the supreme example of God's saving action is Jesus, who was captured and taken away as a criminal. He was tried in nothing more than a circus for a court, blindfolded, spat upon. Struck, whipped, burdened with a wooden beam. He was nailed, hung, deprived of water, mocked and mourned. Finally pierced and killed. This was not a good thing, people of God. Then look at what God did. In and through this horror, God redeemed the world. God changed us, saved us, reconciled us to God's self.

In the very worst of human history, God worked a miracle for good. It is not that all things are good. They are not. Evil ministers rear their ugly heads in our lives. This is a fact of life. But they, too, must fall before the hardship of Christ. They will not be the final word. Death, sin, sadness, never have the final word for Easter always follows Good Friday.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." from confident confession to pleading prayer, from hoping against hope to blessed assurance. In the myriad of voices in which that word can roll off the lips of mortals, the freedom of its truth remains. For it is God's promise and God's power that stands behind it. In the name of Christ. AMEN.

Our God is the God whose Spirit was poured in the disciples on the day of Pentecost and who continues to be present and active in our lives, not a some generic, spiritual deity, but as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in whose name we are baptized. Our God has promised that there is nothing in heaven or on earth, life or death that can separate us from Christ's love for us. Our God is a great God, a loving God, a God of grace, a God of peace, a God of justice, a God who loves us no matter who we are, what we do, and what we don't do. This is the God in whose name we gather to worship, and by whose name we are blessed, and sent out into the world to love and act as people who belong to that God.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, what's in a name? Plenty. What goes hand-in-hand with a brand name is the company that stands behind it with its reputation and guarantee. When it comes to those things that are really important, the things that you would stake your life on, which would you prefer? A generic product from an unknown company or the quality, reputation, and assurance of a name brand? Well, the same holds true for our faith in God. In whom would you stake your life in? In whom do you put your trust? When it comes to what really matters in life, we can look with confidence to God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who calls us into relationship and who invites our loyalty and trust. God. Now that is a name you can count on. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.