

It Came Upon A Midnight Clear: on Sickness and Suffering

(2 Cor. 12:1-10)

Good evening/morning! My name is Mike and I stand before you today as nothing more or less than a **much-loved child of God** and an **imperfect follower of Jesus Christ**.

Well, we're in the thick of it now! Thanksgiving is over, the nice dishes are all put away, the turkey feast is a yummy memory. Our credit cards are cooling down from Black Friday... And now we're singing Christmas Carols! So we decided to finish off our year-long series of Garden to City by picking out a few of them and asking "***Why do we sing the songs we sing at Christmas?***"

Tonight/Today we start this series with "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear:"

*It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth, To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men, From heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay, To hear the angels sing.*

That's the verse we all know, but I bet you've never heard this one...

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load, Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way, With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road, And hear the angels sing!*

Now you know why we don't sing all the verses! That's just depressing! "Life's crushing load... forms bending low... toil... painful steps & slow..." Doesn't sound like much of a Christmas carol... Oh wait... that's reality! That's my life at times, and probably yours too. So maybe we do need to "***rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!***"

A tragedy unfolded in Lawrence this week. One of our students who had been mysteriously missing since before Thanksgiving was found, murdered. It was a rough day yesterday. Students and staff were in shock as we struggled to come to grips with a horrible and senseless reality. The young life, just 15 years old, of a promising student, had been snuffed out. One of my friends, his chemistry teacher, told me how she had just been grading papers the night before, and had graded one of his assignments by faith, hoping for his safe return. His seat in her classroom was empty yesterday and she could hardly keep herself together. I felt it, we all felt it... that evil had won on this day, the light of a human life had been extinguished and the world had become a darker place.

It turns out that old songwriter was right... the world needs to stop! To listen! To hear the angels sing. Why? Because they are singing songs that matter... songs of truth... songs that heal and bring hope. That's what we're going to explore today.

So, what are the angels singing? Well, as it turns out, it's not "*Peace on earth, goodwill to men!*" And... it's not "Jingle Bells or Frosty the Snowman," much as we all love those...

What they are singing are the songs of heaven! Songs that are recorded for us in the book of Revelation... yup, the very last book of the Bible. So here's a sneak peek at the chart-toppers in the heavenly realms...

Of all the songs of heaven, this one's been at #1 for as long as anyone can remember!

***“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”***

One more time... join me...

***“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”***

Can you imagine... an angel choir ... infinite in size... singing these words in the most amazing harmonies?! Before I comment on that, let's look at a few more ... and remember... even though we're just seeing the words, the lyrics, these are all being **sung** in heaven, and the music must be unreal:

***“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”***

I love this one...

***“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”***

***“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”***

***“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”***

Are you noticing a common theme in these angel songs? How would you put it? **Turn & Talk** to someone near you... “What's the Main Idea in these refrains?”

Do it! {pause} Awe? Worship? Yes! These songs are all about God! They're pointed towards Him! They're about who He is and how He is the primary object of attention in heaven. These songs are about the greatness of our Creator ... the worthiness of Jesus Christ to receive honor and glory! Why are these songs so important? Because **these songs** speak of a reality that is already true spiritually, and is waiting to become a part of our human experience. **These songs** remind us that even though life can be so hard here, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, reigns now on the Throne of the universe. **These songs** remind us that in the darkness of this world, He is the Light of the world. **These songs** remind us that when we feel so alone and helpless, He is Immanuel – God with us. **These songs** give us hope... not only that things will be better in the “by and by,” but that even right now, in our present suffering, **“My grace is all you need.”**

These angel songs give us courage to face whatever darkness and suffering we must face in this life, knowing that as Christ reigns now in heaven, someday we will see Him reign over all the earth! And when He does, everything changes... as the ancient OT prophets foretold:

“Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days.

The wasteland will rejoice and blossom ...

2 ...there will be an abundance of flowers, and singing and joy!

There the Lord will display his glory, the splendor of our God.

*5 And when **He** comes, **He** will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf.*

6 The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy!

Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland.

7 The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.

10 Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter (the NEW) Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy.

Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness.

That’s why we’ve got to put life on pause and listen... to hear the angels sing.

In our Scripture reading today, 2 Cor 12, St. Paul tells about a vision from God he had received 14 years later: *“I will reluctantly tell about visions and revelations from the Lord. I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago... I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words...”*

Paul was a strong-willed man. Passionate, stubborn, and heading in the exact wrong direction. It took nothing less than a vision from God to jerk him into reality! This vision he got of heaven was indescribable yet unforgettable. It changed the entire direction of his life. He got a glimpse into heavenly realms. He was caught up into heaven; he saw spiritual realities with physical eyes. We don’t know exactly what he saw, but we know it was indelibly imprinted on his mind... The main thing he had to have seen, of course, was Jesus the King of Kings, seated on the throne of heaven. And he had to have heard those angels singing!

The privilege of having such a vision had the potential of making him not only bull-headed and driven (which he was) but also prideful, which he was not. He writes, *“So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a **thorn in my flesh**, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.”*

So, for the purpose of keeping that lurking pride away, God allowed Satan to plague him with a “thorn in the flesh” - a handicap of some kind... a chronic issue, whether physical or spiritual or both... that would prevent him from ever gaining popular acclaim and the puffed up ego that inevitably goes along with that. We don’t know exactly what his handicap was... but whatever it was, it really bothered him. It bothered him enough that he prayed and prayed for God to remove it. *“Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.”* But in the midst of his suffering and crying out to God for help, God was silent... or was He?

The truth is, God wasn’t silent. Here’s what He said to Paul: **“My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”**

With this “thorn in the flesh,” Paul was never freed from suffering, never released from weakness. Hard to imagine in our culture which so celebrates winners! Paul neither looked like nor sounded like a

winner... ever. And yet, somehow, he found a way to keep going, and even to overcome his suffering. His secret? The truth God gave to him... and through him to us:

“My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”

Suffering is part of the human experience since the first humans decided that their way was better than God’s way and walked out from under His blessing into the cold, dark world we now call reality.

Ever been there? Praying and praying and praying for God to act in some way... whether it is to heal some awful sickness in a loved one, or to provide what is desperately lacking in your life... a full pantry, an adequate bank account, a job, a special someone, a child... And Heaven is silent. You wonder if anyone is even listening.

Paul was very familiar with suffering. In fact, contrary to a lot of Christian testimonies about how much better life is with Jesus, after Paul put his faith in Jesus, things got rapidly and dramatically worse!

He writes in the previous chapter: I’ve *“been put in prison... been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again.”*²⁴ *Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes.*²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. ... I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas.*²⁷ *I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.”*

Paul endured suffering for his faith like few of us have ever endured. I mean, I’ve never been whipped or beaten with rods or shipwrecked. *I have been stoned* 😊.

I’ve never been hungry and thirsty and cold for extended periods of time. I’ve never been a fugitive or hunted with a price on my head. The truth is that there are Christians in our world today for whom such sufferings are their daily reality. Christians in countries like Iran and Iraq live in constant fear. We were all horrified last year to see black-clothed ISIS terrorists march orange-clad prisoners out onto a beach and then proceed to behead them. How could that happen? Didn’t God love them? Didn’t He hear their prayers?

Furthermore, most of us here have been touched by tragedy... perhaps the long suffering and death of a loved one... perhaps acute or chronic financial difficulties... perhaps a horrid work environment... or a terrifying diagnosis... or an ongoing battle with addiction of some sort. We worry over these things, we lose sleep, we pray...and pray...and pray. But heaven is silent. Where do we put this in our brain? How do we cope with unrelenting suffering as children of God? How do we cope with the silence of God?

“My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” Let’s say that together. It already helps, doesn’t it? Just hearing those words and vocalizing that truth brings hope to our souls.

Some of you know my history: that I used to be a pastor... In 2005 I pulled a Jed and left a growing, exciting church behind. I left to start something new, a church in a town that desperately needed a witness for Christ. At first everything was amazing – we all felt directly led by God and fueled by the Holy Spirit. Cool things were happening – the new church was growing and people were coming to Christ. People were being helped and shown the love of God in tangible ways – we painted houses and even reroofed one house for those who couldn’t afford those expensive repairs... Personally I felt closer to God and more in tune with Jesus than ever in my life. It was a season of fresh growth and the power of God.

Which made it so strange that just three years later, things had gone so far south that the church had fractured and I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. About a year earlier, some issues had arisen among the leadership team, and try though we might, they festered like an infection and got worse. We prayed and prayed. I went on days of personal fasting and prayer, asking the Lord to turn this thing around and make it right. Surely, He wanted a church in Littleton?! But at the end of the day, the conflict overwhelmed me, my energy was gone, I felt betrayed, I felt like God had abandoned us and I had no choice but to resign, and the church in Littleton breathed its last.

Words cannot express the soul-level sadness, grief, and disillusionment that I felt. It was like a death... as devastating to me as the death of my own father more than 20 years before, and maybe even worse, since I felt responsible. What could I have done differently? What should I have said differently? But more than anything, "God, why? Why did you not answer? Where were You?"

Two weeks later, my sweet wife, Katie, unwilling to let me descend into darkness without a fight, dragged me into this very basement. We sat in the back row. I didn't sing any of the songs... I couldn't. I didn't close my eyes in prayer or worship. I couldn't. For 6 months, week after week, I couldn't. Then slowly but surely, God's grace began to heal me and to reassure me of His love. My faith began to regain consciousness. And I began to worship again... and to hear the angels sing.

I began to hear from God again. "***My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.***"

Here are a few things I've learned from Scripture about suffering... each one of these could be a sermon or three, but I will try to restrain myself!

1. Suffering is allowed by God, but it is not from God.

Paul's suffering was the work of Satan, but allowed by God for His purposes.

When Jesus was crucified on the Cross, it was at the hands of hateful men fueled by the lies of Satan, but God allowed it for His purposes.

When we experience suffering, loss, or death... it is at the hands of Satan, the enemy of our souls. But God allows it... for His purposes. Some we may someday know, others will be known only to Him. But meanwhile, He promises, "***My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.***"

God loves you! He loves you as much as He loved His own Son! He will not abandon you.

2. Suffering is not punishment or judgment... all of God's judgment fell on Christ.

In another letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul writes, "*So now there is **no condemnation** for those who belong to Christ Jesus.... God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be **fully satisfied** for us.*" (Rom 8:1-4)

In our heart of hearts, most of us are good Hindus... we believe in *karma*, that what goes around comes around, and that we will be punished or rewarded for our good or bad deeds in this life. Well, as much as I love my Hindu friends, and I do... God's good news to them and to us is that it doesn't work that way. The way of Jesus is not *karma*, it's grace. As incredible as it sounds, the way of Jesus is that all of our wrongdoing... yours, mine, even that horrible act committed in Lawrence... all of humanity's awfulness... were put upon Jesus. All the punishment due to humanity for our atrocities, fell upon Jesus when He died on the Cross. Justice was done, the hate crimes of humanity were paid for... not **by** us... **for us**... by Jesus. That's grace.

3. Suffering can either drive us to our knees or drive us to drink.

Our modern society is all about personal comfort and the avoidance of pain. So when pain comes, we are ill-equipped to handle it. One frequent response is self-medication... whether it's a drink or a toke or a pill... just something to dull the pain and make us forget. And there are many other means as well. The trouble is, of course, that when we return to reality, reality still sucks... nothing has changed... except now we have a new, very unhealthy dependency!

In a very short NT letter, St James writes, "*Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray.*" Sounds so trite, but in reality it is profound. Prayer, you see, isn't just us offering up a "To Do list" for God. So, God... please bless my friends and my family... and do something nasty to my annoying coworker... and about that Mercedes...

Prayer is about coming humbly before God, worshiping Him for who He is (the angels songs!) and laying your life and your heart bare before Him. When we do, an amazing change takes place. Sometimes circumstances change... but much more often, **we change**. We gain a new perspective... we receive encouragement ... we are enabled and empowered to cope, with a new strength.

4. Suffering can either lead us into hope or drown us in despair.

Jesus said, "*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.*" (JN 16:33) Once more, our encouragement as suffering followers of Christ comes from seeing Christ for who He really is... the Suffering but Conquering King, the Lamb who was slain, and who is now seated on the Throne.

This is where the message of Advent most clearly intersects with the suffering of real life.

We're in the season the church has traditionally called **Advent**... which simply means "The Coming." It is a season during which Christians celebrate the Coming of Jesus into our world as a baby human... but it also calls us even deeper... to anticipate His Second Coming when He will be fully revealed as King of kings and Lord of Lords! During this season, our culture has chosen to focus on the Manger Scene but the focus of the early Christians was much different. They were intently waiting for and eagerly anticipating **Christ's return**. We would do well to do both: to celebrate **Christmas**, for that is **Sacred History**; but also to anticipate **His Return**, for that is our **Sacred Hope**.

In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John was also granted a vision into the spiritual realms; and this is what he saw:

"I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands... Then one of the twenty-four elders asked me, "Who are these who are clothed in white? Where did they come from?"

*Then he said to me, "These are the ones who died in the **great tribulation**. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white.*

*15 "That is why they stand in front of God's throne
and serve him day and night in his Temple.*

And he who sits on the throne will give them shelter.

*16 They will never again be hungry or thirsty;
they will never be scorched by the heat of the sun.*

17 For the Lamb on the throne will be their Shepherd.

*He will lead them to springs of life-giving water.
And God will wipe every tear from their eyes."*

When Christ returns a second time, He returns to make all things new!

A new Earth... a new society... a new me, a new you!

A re-Creation of the original Garden, even better than before. Where there is no more hunger, or suffering... no more sorrow, no more death.

This is what Advent means... our God has come and He is coming again.

So as Isaiah the prophet said, "With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming... He is coming to save you."

I'm afraid I've bombarded you with a lot tonight/today. I hope that in the volume of all that's been said, you've heard at least one specific take away from God tonight/today.

Let me wrap it up by suggesting a few possibilities:

- 1) Make time to listen to God and to hear the angels sing!
- 2) Make a point to encourage someone by telling them of God's love and Christ's return!
- 3) Make a difference in this world somehow, for it's what you've been left here to do until He comes.
- 4) Tattoo this on your brain: "***My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.***"

Now...

***"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"***

Let us pray!