**Sermon Text**: James 5:7-11

**Occasion**: Third Sunday of Advent, 11 Dec 2022

**As Steadfast as Job**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The liturgical colour for the third Sunday of Advent is rose in order to express the theme of “joy” appointed for the day. The scripture readings for the day, though, do not sound terribly joyful. The gospel reading (Matt 11:2-15) was about John the Baptist being in prison and the attempts to seize the kingdom of God through violence. The epistle (James 5:7-11) urges us to be patient until the Lord comes, waiting in steadfastness and suffering like Job. And the Old Testament reading from Isaiah (35:1-10) sounds very joyful, celebrating the undoing of the evils of this world, but our joy might be put to the test in waiting for that to happen in the world to come.

However, all this sums up joy in the Bible quite well. Joy for the New Testament saints is not about what is going in the here and now. The Lord’s people are always undergoing hardship in the world. This world offers pain and persecution, which is nothing that we did not know already. So, our joy is not loitering in this world but coming into the next. Joy in the New Testament is about waiting with eager expectation of the fulfilment of God’s promises in Christ. Christ came in Christmas Day to bring about an end to the guilt of sin at the cross. By his sufferings we are healed and through his pierced side we see heaven (cf. Heb 10:18). It is through the sacrifice of Jesus that we have the promise of paradise made manifest and we await for this Gospel truth to reach every hear which can hear. Then, at the appointed time, Jesus will descend and his paradise which he promised will come with him. The joy we have is knowing our Lord is with us now in our tribulation and that he will deliver us from our suffering. Yet, we do not know when this will happen nor what will happen in the meantime.

In this respect, we are a lot like Job. Job was afflicted by great evils in this world, had to wade through persecution, and he prayed in desperation for God to hear him and deliver him when he did understand why God would let this happen. It is quite appropriate to, as St James declares in his letter, to consider those who remain steadfast like Job. We know the purpose of the Lord: to save His people and bless His heritage; to be our shepherd and carry us forever (Ps 28:9). Yet, we lack the specifics and, although our lives are forever guarded by the Lord, God does not promise to stop every evil in the world from touching our flesh and spirit (cf. Job 2:6). Yet the answer to facing any and every circumstance, whether in times of happiness or in times of tribulation is to rely on the one who strengthens you (Php 4:12-13). The Lord will save His people and bless us, and He will strengthen us through our most bitter tribulations that we may steadfastly endure.

Of course, this is easier said than done. When Job—unknowing of why he was afflicted nor knowing if he would ever be delivered from his suffering, when Job cried out against the Lord many times, his words had less piety than we might expect. Job proclaimed a wide range of emotional and rational outcries spanning the whole range of what we expect to find in grief. There are times Job blames God outright for his sufferings. For example, early on the book of Job, he says,

*Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
    I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
    I will complain in the bitterness of my soul….*

*I loathe my life; I would not live forever.
    Leave me alone, for my days are a breath.*

*What is man, that you [O Lord] make so much of him,
    and that you set your heart on him,
visit him every morning
    and test him every moment? (*Job 7:11, 16-18)

Normally, we think of enduring hardship as a silent suffering. We do not vocalize our suffering and despair, which is not the most helpful way to address our inner turmoil. When we undergo stress and trauma in this world, we are meant to express it. We are meant to communicate our hardships so they are not left bottled up within our chests, eating us from the inside out. This is why prayer is so helpful. Job could communicate to God exactly what he was feeling without feeling ashamed. He could speak the truth. If Job had ignored his problems and refused to speak these words to God, then he would have been lying to the Lord about the state of his heart. The fact of the matter was that Job experienced the destruction of his life and wanted to know why God watched this happen.

When we ourselves are waiting for things in this world to turn over to the paradise to come, we are not always happy—although the joy of God’s promises always remains amongst us. While we may not be honest with our neighbours or even ourselves about our worries and poor circumstances, there is no use being dishonest with God. He knows everything, including your heart. Rather than let things be bottled up inside you while you endure waiting for Christ to return, look to the steadfastness of Job. He endured yet he would not be silent. He did not refuse to let God enter the recesses of his heart. He took the pain and anguish which was inside him and called on the name of the Lord to be saved (Rom 10:13).

Waiting is never easy; not for Christmas and certainly not for Christ’s return. And while we wait for Jesus, we in the kingdom of heaven experience violence against the kingdom. We can talk about the major things like slander against God’s Church, persecutions in the world, feeling the effects of war and disease. And we can speak of the small things like not having everything or everyone we might like at Christmas. We can also see that the Christian heritage of Christmas being denied in favour of secularism. Yet, despite these affronts against God, His people, our flesh, and our sensibilities, we can still remain steadfast. Despite everything that assaults us in the world—major or minor—Jesus has already won the victory over trials and tribulation by defying death in his own tribulation. We know we have salvation awaiting us despite what we face today. The pain of our current estate does not prove God has abandoned us, our pain serves to show our need for Christ to deliver us. Job says as much when he declares,

*O earth, cover not my blood,
    and let my cry find no resting place.
Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
    and he who testifies for me is on high.
My friends scorn me;
    my eye pours out tears to God,
that he would argue the case of a man with God,
    as a son of man does with his neighbor.* (Job 16:19-21)

Jesus Christ, our witness, is in heaven declaring to our heavenly Father that he has freed us from the guilt of sin. There is no punishment anymore. We are forgiven and renewed in Christ. Despite being afflicted by evil in the world, we do not deserve any of it. We cannot deserve evil. With Jesus has taking our sin away, there is nothing left to punish us for. And now as our witness who dwells in heaven, Jesus pleas for our deliverance and salvation unto our heavenly Father. Our God knows our innocence through faith in Christ and He holds no one accountable for sin which has been forgiven. Therefore, if we experience any evil in the world, it is undeserved. And if we remain steadfast in our afflictions then the promise remains that we will be delivered from them.

All that is left for us is salvation. But we must be patient. We do not know when our witness in heaven will return to us here on earth. As I said before, it is not easy to wait, but we do know there is something beyond what we have here. We see the promise of this in everything the Lord gives to us. He promises us peace in his words of forgiveness. He promises salvation in our baptism (1 Peter 3:21). And He promises the future paradise in the Lord’s Supper which is a foretaste of the feast to come. We can have joy now, not because of what the world is throwing at us, but in what is promised to us and we rejoice when the promises of God sustains us through the means of grace—His Word and Sacraments. There will come a time when the evils sprung against us will come to an end, as Job says,

*Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,
    that you would conceal me until your wrath be past,
    that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!
If a man dies, shall he live again?
    All the days of my service I would wait,
    till my renewal should come.
You would call, and I would answer you;
    you would long for the work of your hands.* (Job 14:13-15)

Whatever may come to us in this world, the Lord remembers us. He never forgets us and urges us always to come to Him for He will not abandon us. We will not be lost to dismay, defeat, or death though all these things may touch our flesh. We have Christ. He once came into this world to proclaim to the lost that there remains salvation in our God. He will come again in glory and power to bring us into a life we can only imagine now—a life like Isaiah described. Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears unstopped. Your aching body will be made new to leap like a deer. Weak hands and feeble knees will be strengthened and set straight. Rejoicing will pour out from our lips as abundantly as water flows in a river.

The reason why we can remain steadfast through suffering like Job is that we do not have a God who let’s our prayers fall on deaf ears. God is the one who causes the deaf to hear, how can He not hear us when we cry to Him? Though we wait and wade through a world weighted with misery, we have a God who hears us and will not fail to stand beside us. Christ remains with us and his promises will not fail. Jesus will return as surely as he came on Christmas morn. We will be with our God and he will remain with us. The Lord longs for those who are His. We are lovingly fashioned by our God, He will not cast us aside after refashioning us in Christ.

*For I know that my Redeemer lives,
    and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
    yet in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see for myself,
    and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
    My heart faints within me!* (Job 19:25-27). Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.