

John 16:12-22 5

The Word of the Lord from John 16:

"21When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 22So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." This is the Word of the Lord. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Promises to Moms and Disciples

I realize that Mother's Day was last week, but this text frequently falls prior to Mother's Day and regardless of when it falls in our calendar consider the truth that motherhood is one of the most important vocations in the world. Motherhood is how the Lord brings life into the world. God could have kept creating people out of dust and ribs if He wanted to, but He opted for about nine months of development in utero. That means that moms have a 40 week on parenting that we dads do not. They have to adjust schedules, abstain from certain medications and watch their diets. There are risks like morning sickness, diabetes and other complications. There's the sacrifice of one's figure as the weight gains and the baby grows. This explains a lot about maternal instincts and a mother's love for her children: she's been sacrificing for them for forty weeks before they're even born. Because motherhood is such a holy calling, it's no surprise that it's also, therefore, one of the most underappreciated by the world.

Among some fringe subcultures in America, parents are contemptuously called "breeders," a lower class of humans who produce more children to keep the human race going so that others can just have their fun. That's the extreme, but in mainstream thought a stay-at-home mom is still considered less successful than a woman who forgoes motherhood for a career outside the home.

For fashionistas, stretch marks are a cosmetic horror! Theologically, perhaps they ought to be a badge of honor signifying that the Lord has appointed that woman as one to bring more life into the world. To all those with mothers, you're now on notice and you have no excuse. To all mothers: you're welcome! I'm not talking about motherhood because we celebrated it last Sunday, though. I speak of it because Jesus speaks of it in our text. The scene is the Last Supper: His death is imminent, and He is teaching His disciples one last time before He is crucified.

As the text begins, Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit, whom He's already been discussing in John 16. He says, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." They're already anxious and sorrowful. Jesus has already told them that He's going away—alarming enough—and (worse still!) that one of them is going to betray Him. He's told them that they will face persecution, too. Things are about to change. The disciples are on edge. Even though He has more to tell them, they can't bear any more right now. But if He is going away, who will tell them? Are they left all alone, to their own thoughts and decision-making? If you've followed the thoughts and decisions of the disciples so far when they're acting apart from Christ, that's not a very comforting source. So Jesus tells them something they can bear to hear: "

13When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. 14He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. 15All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you.”

The Holy Spirit will come to them. I've pointed you back to Mother's Day, but Jesus points them to Pentecost. They will not be alone. The Holy Spirit will come: He is the Spirit of Truth, and He will guide them in all truth. Note for a moment where that truth comes from: it comes from Jesus, who is the Truth. The Holy Spirit will not speak on His own authority, but He will continue to teach them the things that Jesus wants them to know, but they can't bear. And since what belongs to Jesus also belongs to the Father, the Holy Spirit will teach them all that both God the Father and God the Son want them to know.

The Holy Trinity is at work for your salvation. One more thing about the Holy Spirit: Jesus says, "He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and give it to you." As a bit of a side trip for a moment, please note what Jesus teaches about the work of the Holy Spirit: the work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus, to teach us about Him. The purpose of the Holy Spirit is not to do wacky things not covered by the Scriptures or to introduce new revelations beyond the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit desires to point us to Christ and teach us about our Savior.

When Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach the disciples, you don't have to wonder what the Holy Spirit taught. You have the evidence: you have the New Testament. That's the truth that the Spirit delivered to the apostles and evangelists. And through the apostles and evangelists, that is the truth that the Spirit delivers to you. If you desire that the Holy Spirit teach you, don't go looking all over the place for strange dreams and new revelations. Run to the Word. That's where the Holy Spirit is at work to deliver the truth—Jesus—to you.

Back to our text...the Holy Spirit is coming, says Jesus, and repeats why this is necessary: "A little while," He says, "and you will see Me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see Me." The disciples are still confused and troubled: "What is this He says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father'? ...We do not know what he is talking about." First and foremost, Jesus is talking about the cross. In a little while, He is going to go away: He'll be seized at Gethsemane, rushed through several different sham trials and crucified the following day. He's going to be wrenched away, suddenly and violently. He'll be transported to the grave. He'll descend into hell.

Meanwhile, while the world jumps for joy, the disciples will think all is lost. They'll weep and lament at both His death and their sin and weakness. They'll be sorrowful, but in a little while—the third day, He's going to rise again from the dead. He's going to appear to them as they hide fearfully in a locked room. He's going to show them His hands and His side, and He's going to speak peace to them...and they will be overjoyed when they see the Lord. So Jesus compares those next three days to a mother in labor. The nine months are over, but the baby isn't born. It's the time of delivery, with the contractions and the labor pains. The word for

“anguish” here is the same word for “tribulation” in the book of Revelation. The mother is anguished and anxious as she endures the labor pains—and as that continues, she may wonder if the tribulation will ever end. But when all goes the way it should, and she’s holding the infant in her arms, the anguish is replaced by joy because, through her, another person with fingers and toes, body and soul has been born into the world. The joy replaces the sorrow. The anguish is over.

That’s how it is for the disciples when Jesus is betrayed: all anguish, no joy. Three days later, when they see the risen Christ: all joy, no anguish. This will repeat again. Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus will go away again: He’ll ascend into heaven, no longer visible to the disciples. Ten days after that, the Holy Spirit will come—just as Jesus promises in our Gospel lesson. After that, the apostles will go forth to make disciples of all nations—and all but John will die a martyr’s death for speaking the Gospel that you and proclaim freely here. They will have a lot of sorrow and anguish again: the rest of the New Testament is full of troubles and worries for the disciples.

However, the joy does not cease. Consider St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4: We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2Co 4:8-12 ESV).

They are not overcome by anguish: even when suffering, they know that Christ is risen. He is their joy. And no one will take away their joy from them.

Promises

To You Jesus promises the same to you. You will have sorrow now, but you will see Him in glory and your heart will rejoice, and no one can take your joy from you. You’re like the mother in labor, wondering if the tribulation is ever going to end. Jesus says yes, and what follows is joyful beyond your imagination. He’s died on the cross and risen again to make it so. Keep that in mind, because for now there will be sorrow and anguish. There will be weeping and lamentation. Perhaps the example of motherhood serves as the best illustration. While Jesus’ example in our text of the woman in labor has a happy ending, we know that this is not the case. It was Luther who noted that the office of motherhood comes with very few promises, except this one from Genesis 3: “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (Gen 3:16 ESV).

In the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin, few joys would have compared to the arrival of the next newborn child, the labor free of anguish and full of only joy. But with sin came this consequence: with childbirth comes pain, because every child that is born is under the curse of sin. So for mothers—and fathers, too—having children is a venture into the unknown because there are few promises attached. Moms find this out at the early prenatal visit when the doctor wants to screen the baby for various disabilities, so that they can decide, um, “what to do.”

Throughout those 40 weeks, parents hope and pray that everything is going well, that all the fingers and toes are in all the right places. Then there's concern for labor and delivery, that mother and child be kept safe. Statistically, the odds are good that everything's going to be okay. But those are odds, not promises. That's life in a sinful world. And once the child is born, I daresay that the concerns don't go away. Moms will always have both joy and anguish for holding the office of motherhood. For others, the anguish is related but different.

There's the couple who would dearly love to have children, but cannot—that is sorrow. There are those who are alone, who would love to have spouses and family, but it hasn't worked out that way. That is anguish, too. There's the pregnant woman who has the gift of an unborn child without the blessing of marriage—there is sorrow there as well. And there are parents who have buried children, one of the worst sorrows of all. Furthermore, while I've stuck to examples related to Jesus' illustration of moms and labor so far, there's far more anguish in life than that.

Whoever you are, and though you may be impossibly distant from prospects of labor and delivery, there is anguish and there will be more. There will be weeping and there will be lamentation. Even while the world is rejoicing, there is plenty of trouble to make everybody cry. If you are one who weeps, know that you are not alone. While the Lord gives no promises or guarantees about healthy babies, employment, happiness or such things in this dying world, He does make this promise to you as He did to those disciples: "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." Jesus sees you. He sees all things, of course, but there's more to it than that: Jesus knows you. He knows your name. He named you at your Baptism where He brought you into His family, His kingdom. It wasn't just Him: there, you were baptized in the name of the Father—who gives all that He has to the Son, the Son—who has died and risen to win salvation for you, and the Holy Ghost—who continues to guide you into all truth by means of God's holy Word.

Where the Word is, the Lord is; and so the Lord is not far away, but He is with you. There will be sorrow for a little while, but He is with you in that sorrow; and He even uses that sorrow for your good. Where there is the sorrow of guilt, He teaches you the joy of forgiveness. Where there is the sorrow of doubt or worry, He strengthens your faith by His Word and teaches you the joy of trusting in Him. Where there is the sorrow of grief, He reminds you that He has conquered even death and He constantly points you to the joy of heaven that is yours in Him. There is sorrow for now; but while it may seem that it will last forever, it is not so. It is only for a little while, and then you are in heaven forever. There are few guarantees and certainties in this world. Sorrow and death are certainly constants, but the Lord does not leave you in weeping and hopelessness. He promises that this will only be for a little while; and in a little while, He will return. You will see Christ. You will be free from grief. You will also see those who died in the faith. This is hope for all, and for parents: there are many here who have lost children, often even before the children were born. We commend them to the Lord with confidence in His mercy. We await that day when that sorrow is turned to joy that no one can take away. For this is true: Christ has died and Christ is risen, never to die again. He has conquered sin, death and the sorrow that these enemies bring. Their days are numbered. Yours are not. In Christ is joy that no one can take from you, because eternal life is yours. And eternal life is yours because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen