

PADDLING OUT ON THE BIG DAYS

John 16:16-33

Three years ago Laurie and I got to fulfill a long time dream when we went to Disneyworld in Orlando with our then single adult kids. On our flight back we went through Houston. As we were on our descent Toby called my attention to a high school football stadium we could see. I had to look across the plane because it was on the other side. Seated across from us were a mom, dad and their little girl all decked out in Disney princess garb. The little girl, seeing me looking out the window next to her, slapped her hand up on the window and loudly said, “That’s my window. You can’t look out my window.” Her dad ruefully shook his head and said, “She’s been told all week that she’s a princess and now she’s impossible.”

Disney is great at selling the princess ideal to little girls. You see them everywhere at Disneyland and Disneyworld. But have you ever paid attention to the reality of those princess fairy tales? Cinderella was orphaned and then essentially enslaved by an uncaring and brutal family before she was set free by the glass slipper. Sleeping Beauty was cursed so that she went to sleep and stayed that way for 100 years. During that prolonged sleep her relatives mourned her and her mother died of a broken heart. Snow White is the victim of an insanely jealous step mother who repeatedly tries to kill her and eventually puts her into a coma through the use of a poisoned apple until she is saved by the handsome prince. The original Little Mermaid is really tragic as Ariel, despite making huge sacrifices for love, is spurned for another woman by the man she loves, throws herself into the ocean and dissolves into sea foam. Naomi Zacharias, advocate for at risk women and director of Wellspring International says, “We want the good part of the fairy tale...we have only preserved the idea of happily ever after. On the screen and in our minds we have rewritten the stories and forgotten about the battles.” Why such conflict? Perhaps it is because they are intended to prepare kids for the fact that life is going to have battles.

Those fairy tales remind us about the way life really is. It doesn’t always end with happily ever after, but it always involves danger and difficulty. We will see that this morning as we look at Jesus’ words in John 16:16-33.

THE DISCIPLES WOULD GRIEVE BUT LATER REJOICE

The disciples were confused by Jesus’ statement that “in a little while you will see me no more, then after a little while you will see me.” It sounds like some sort of riddle. You won’t see me, then you will see me. Now you see me, now you don’t, now you do again. They also wondered how long “a little while” was. We have the hindsight of history so we know what Jesus meant, but they didn’t get it at all.

When Jesus said that they wouldn't see him he meant he was going to be killed and put into a tomb. At that point the disciples verse 20 tells us the disciples would "weep and mourn while the world rejoices." He was exactly right. His opponents were rejoiced because they got rid of Jesus and there was no riot or uprising. They had dispensed with him and thought they could happily go on with life as usual, minus one really irritating troublemaker from the sticks of Galilee. Meanwhile the disciples would be totally devastated and afraid.

But Jesus said that would not be the end of the story. He said what happened to him would be like a woman having a baby. I watched Laurie give birth to three children. In a word, that process was terrifying. The whole nine month long thing was an ordeal. Most moms would be justified in saying to their children "you make me sick," because the process starts with the child literally causing morning sickness. I recall Laurie in the early months of pregnancy going to open the refrigerator door as she began preparing dinner, smelling the odors emanating from the fridge, turning a shade of green, closing the door, heading for the bathroom and having her lunch make an encore appearance. When she was pregnant with Carissa we had some friends over one evening and we began talking about our favorite kind of pizza. One guy said his favorite was shrimp pizza. Laurie immediately went into the bathroom and threw up. That usually gets better, but then come all those other awful things. The pregnant woman's internal organs get shoved into tiny corners of her abdomen, her bladder gets squeezed with unpleasant results to say nothing of the digestion issues. Backaches, leg aches, fluctuating hormones, inability to sleep. It's a mess. But finally it reaches its climax as the labor pains start hitting. Wait, you're telling me there's a mini-human inside that woman and it has to come through that narrow tunnel? Is that possible? That looks like it might hurt...a lot. Rumor has it that it does indeed. Actually it isn't a rumor. There's nothing like having this woman you love screaming and looking at you with that, "You did this to me!" expression. And then it's over. The baby is born and there is an explosion of joy that is like nothing you've ever experienced. That baby, the source of so much hardship and pain, now is the source of joy so deep you cannot express it, a joy that fills your entire being.

Jesus said that was an analogy for his death and resurrection. His death was going to be the worst thing his disciples had ever experienced. It was going to cause them grief and sadness such as they had never known. Their great hope was going to be dashed and they would be left with disillusionment, fear, confusion, anger, indignation, hopelessness and a paralyzing sadness over what happened to the best man they'd ever known. Then the resurrection would happen. It would be so good that at first they couldn't believe it. It would be so joyous, so full of hope, that it would obliterate all loss, all sadness, all anger and replace it with limitless joy.

At the end of the gospel of Luke the risen Jesus is with the disciples and ascends into heaven after once again explaining all that had gone on. Luke 24:53 says of the disciples,

“They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” It was just as Jesus said. Their sorrow had turned into a joy that no one and nothing could ever take away. All of life for them had changed. Now for the first time they really understood who Jesus was and what his life was about. They understood God’s work of grace, they understood that he had given them hope and new life, and most of all they knew that life after death is real, that they would someday rise from the dead to live in God’s eternal kingdom of joy and that because of that all was right in their world. Nothing could ever take that from them.

THE DISCIPLES WOULD BE LOVED BY THE FATHER

In verse 23 Jesus says, “In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” This is a reiteration of the promise he gave in 14:13, “I will do whatever you ask in my name.” There is a slight change here though. Jesus says “You will no longer ask me anything.” He means you will have a direct relationship to God the Father that is like the one they had with Jesus. They will have a personal, intimate relationship with the Father.

Verse 27 says “The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.” In John 1:12 the apostle wrote, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name (speaking of Jesus), he gave the right to become children of God.” This is the relationship that Jesus was describing in chapter 16. Because they believed in Jesus, because they accepted him for what he was, the Son of God, they were now given the unfathomable privilege of being adopted by the Almighty God has his own kids. God would love them as his children. They would have the privilege of asking God directly in prayer knowing their Father would answer.

Not long ago Toby asked me if we had finished our tax forms. He said he needed some information from them. That surprised me. Why would he need our tax information? It turned out that he was filling out the FAFSA, Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Or as I call it, the FFKAW, the Form Formerly Known As Waterboarding. It’s the form everyone filing for student aid is required to fill out. Toby said it asked for his parents’ tax information. I thought he had misunderstood it. He is married. He and Anna are totally independent from us and have been for quite some time. We do not claim them as dependents. Why would the government need to know our financial information? It turns out he was right. The government informed him as he goes to med school Laurie and I are expected to contribute thousands of dollars to the cause. We can’t do that but we have already contributed to them and will continue to do so, because they are our kids. We spent loads of money buying food, clothes, toys, books, paying for college to raise that boy. We paid for college. We’ve given money to help with their wedding and to help the two of them as they’ve been getting started. And more than money, much more, our hearts are always with them. We care deeply about all that happens in their lives and want to support and encourage and aid them in whatever way we can.

One example of this love parents have for kids is what happened two years ago. Carissa had to move out of the apartment she was in and move into a new place. The timing of the move proved more than a little inconvenient. The day she could move into her new place happened right at the time she was going to be visiting Michael, who was deployed in Japan. She didn't know what to do. So we said, you go to Japan and we'll move your stuff. I hate moving. But we moved her when she was out of the country. We did it gladly because we love our daughter. We want to have a relationship with our children in which they can talk to us about anything and everything and they can ask anything from us. If it is within our power we will do it. This is the kind of relationship Jesus said the Father will have with his disciples.

We have been given the priceless gift of becoming children of the Heavenly Father and having that open, close relationship with him. I am as flawed and imperfect as any dad. But I can testify, as can most dads, that there is no way to express how deeply I care about my kids. That is a love so powerful it almost hurts. I am proud of them, I delight in them, I would do anything to protect them, the only thing in my life that is on the level of how much I enjoy being with them is how much I love and enjoy being with my wife. Now do a little math. Take that love that I have, subtract all selfish imperfection and flaws from it and multiply the result by infinity. The product is the love relationship the Heavenly Father has for you.

The ancient Jews had some concept of this love. Psalm 103:13 says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him." In Isaiah 49:15 God says to Israel, "Can a mother forget the baby she has borne and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you." But that tended to be viewed as God's attitude toward the nation of Israel. It is the whole nation that is depicted as his son.

Jesus introduced a new level of personal intimacy and love into a relationship with the Father. This is what Paul marveled at in Romans 8:15 when he said that the Spirit, whom we receive by believing in Jesus, enables us to cry out to the Father, "Abba," meaning daddy! The ancient Jews had great awe of Yahweh, the Almighty. They felt they were unworthy to even utter his name. He was majestic, all powerful, worthy of worship and praise. He still is. But this was a mind expanding new concept. This Almighty Creator was granting to those who believe the right to be like his kids whom he dotes on.

Many, maybe most, of us, struggle with believing that God could truly love us like that. We are undeserving of that kind of love and we are all too aware of how unworthy we are. We figure God is pretty disgusted or annoyed at us. Jesus said because of what he was about to do on that cross the Father now loves you regardless of all that.

Recently Jerry, Ann and my mother reported that they attended the first birthday party of the most recent member of the clan, little J. J., their grandson and great grandson. They had a birthday cake for him. What do you suppose he did with the cake? He did what it seems like every one year old does with cake, ate a little and smeared most of it all over himself. Do you get angry with a child who does that? Do you berate him for wasting cake that you went to so much trouble to bake or buy? Do you turn away in frustration with such a backward child who apparently has an eating disorder of the worst kind? No, what you do is laugh and take pictures. You enjoy the misadventures of a one year old. It brings you delight! That is how God sees us. Yes, we miss the point of cake and make a mess with far more of it ending up on the floor and on ourselves than in our mouths, and he laughs. He does so because he understands us and he delights in us.

We tend to get hung up over the fact that Jesus said we can ask anything of the Father and he will answer. We dealt with this back in chapter 14 so I'm not going to go over that again. But what I want you to grasp is that Jesus is promising an amazing relationship here. Just as my kids can ask me for anything, I want them to talk to me about everything, so the Father wants us to ask him and talk to him because he loves us. The most important and life changing thing we can do is grasp and live in the truth that Jesus was revealing here. The Father loves you. In Ephesians 3:19 Paul wrote that he prayed that we would "know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure to all the fullness of God." What will enable us to be filled to the fullness of God, to have his life bursting within us? It is knowing the Father's love, that surpasses knowledge.

Well this all seems like really good news so far. There will be some sorrow but it won't last, and then there will be unbounded joy. We are going to have this great love of the Father being poured into us. This is really cool. Then Jesus lets the other shoe drop.

THE DISCIPLES WOULD HAVE TROUBLE

The disciples are excited about what they're hearing. At the end of verse 30 they say, "This makes us believe that you came from God." Well finally you get it, Einstein. Have you ever noticed the curious thing that though Einstein was a genius, when people use his name to refer to someone they mean the exact opposite? Like when your wife keeps explaining something to you and you keep insisting she is wrong, then the light comes on and you realize she's right and she says, "Well finally you get it, Einstein." What she means is, "How dense is that block of wood on top of your neck?"

Now at last the disciples believe that Jesus came from God? Really? The time he stopped a storm in its tracks by telling it to calm down didn't give them a clue? When he showed up walking across the water on the lake it didn't seem a bit out of the ordinary? When he raised Lazarus from the dead they didn't suspect that maybe something was different about this guy? In verse 31 Jesus says, "You believe at last!" Doesn't that sound like

Jesus was raising his arms in mock wonder and saying “Finally”? I have to wonder if he was thinking, “Wow, I’ve got an entire football team of Einsteins here.”

At least they finally got it and he is happy about that. However, as glad as he is that they were getting the picture, they still had some growing to do. In verse 32 he tells them that within hours they are all going to bail on him and leave him all alone at the crucial moment. He wasn’t telling them that to criticize them. In verse 33 he said, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Can you imagine how the disciples felt after they bailed out on Jesus at the most difficult moment of his life? They were going to be in a world of guilt and self-condemnation. I’ll bet they ran those scenes over and over in their minds, beating themselves up for their actions. Jesus told them all these things so that they would have peace. He was saying, “I know all about what’s going to happen. I want you to know the Father still loves you and I love you. I anticipated this and it changes nothing between us, so relax and be at peace.”

In fact, all that he said was aimed at giving them peace. They were going to have trouble and lots of it in the world. That is the nature of life in this broken place. It is a place where evil is ever present, where the tide of life is constantly going to run against Jesus followers. Satan is the god of this age and he is making sure that believers in Jesus have a hard road. Those disciples all did indeed have trouble. They were opposed, rejected, abused, ridiculed, and ultimately killed for their faith. Jesus warned the disciples about this because he wanted them to “take heart.”

The word used here means “to have courage, to dare, to be bold.” He wanted his followers not to be overwhelmed by the trouble that will come in all our lives. He wants us to dare, to be bold. We often become the very opposite of daring and being bold when trouble arrives. What so often happens is we get caught up in self-pity, feeling sorry for ourselves because our lives are so hard and things always seem to go against us. “It’s like I’m cursed. Whatever I want or hope for, I get the opposite. Poor me. I feel sorry for me and you should too. Personally I think God has abandoned me if he was ever there in the first place. I will never trust him again.” We become fearful, depressed and totally consumed by our misfortune.

That could easily have happened to Jesus’ disciples. They had no end of trouble. How easily they could have descended into, “Well thanks a lot, Lord. I try to serve you and everybody else gets all the food, the love and the success they want, I get rejection, ridicule and awful mistreatment.” They could have just gone into the corner and sucked their thumbs because life was so hard for them.

Jesus wanted them to face trouble with confidence and boldness. This is not about denying that it can be hard, painful, even discouraging. This is about not being defeated by the inevitable difficulties of living in a Satan influenced broken world. In my younger days in high school and for two years in college I tried to play baseball. I mostly practiced a lot and didn't get to play in the games much because I was awful. Especially in college we spent a lot of time working on our batting swing. Our coach had us do soft toss drills where a teammate would just lightly toss a ball to you from about 10 feet away. Then we would hit off pitching machines. But the thing that really mattered, the only thing that counted, was when we actually were put in a game and had to bat against a pitcher from the opposing team. They didn't just softly toss the ball up to the plate so you could concentrate on swinging correctly. They didn't repeat the same pitch over and over like a machine. They were downright Machiavellian. They would change the speeds they threw. They would pitch inside then outside, sometimes up high out of the strike zone sometimes down low. Most devilish of all they would at times put spin on the ball that would cause it to change its path toward the plate (known as a curve or a slider). And to add to the complication they weren't always reliable. Sometimes they would throw a pitch and it would come right at you. If it hit you it would hurt, and could even do some real damage. It was very difficult and often discouraging.

Since it was so hard do you think as a wannabe player I said, "Wow, the last thing I want is to have to get in a game and hit against a live opposing pitcher. That's a little dangerous, and it is very hard. I know for a fact that I will mostly fail and look bad"? Do you think I said, "I would much prefer to stay here in the batting cage hitting soft toss drills because I know I can do that well and there's no chance I'll get hurt"? Absolutely not. I lived for the chance to get in a game. Every player did. We longed for the opportunity to come to the plate against an opposing team's pitcher. That was what we were there to do! It was what mattered. All the other stuff, the easy stuff in the batting cages, was intended to prepare us for that trial.

That is a picture of the troubles of our lives. Jesus calls on us to have courage when the trouble comes, to be bold. When life gets hard, when all seems to be against you, don't deny that it is hard, discouraging, fearful, difficult, but remind yourself, "This is the ball game. This is what I'm here to do. This is when I am actually in the game! All the other stuff in life has been preparing me for this."

Jesus gave a reason for this boldness. He said, "I have overcome the world." It was going to look like the world handed Jesus the ultimate defeat. Whatever may happen in our lives, it cannot compare with what the world did to Jesus. He appeared to be a victim, totally defeated by the world. But Jesus overcame the world. Even the suffering and death the world perpetrated on him turned out to be part of his plan to defeat death itself. His resurrection would prove to be the greatest victory the world will ever see.

No matter how dark our days may be, Jesus has overcome the world. There is victory as we trust in him even during our darkest days. In fact continuing to trust him while we're in the teeth of the trial is the victory! When we suffer but continue to praise and trust God it is a huge win. There is always hope, because no matter what happens to us, somehow God will bring good out of it and in the end we have the certainty of eternal life with our Lord.

Dan and Josi Jacobs suffered a painful and shocking loss recently. After previously surviving the devastating loss of their second son, Samuel, Josi was pregnant with their fourth child, their first daughter, Madelyn Joy. At her twenty week checkup they were again crushed when they were informed that there was no heartbeat, that little Madelyn had died. Josi sent out a message a few days later. In it she wrote, "We have received so much love and support from all of you and our Anchor Church family to help us get through this tough time. The evidence of God has been everywhere we turn during this process." She went on to say they felt "the presence of God with them the whole time." They are being of good courage, being bold, because Jesus is with them and he has overcome the world.

APPLICATION

DO NOT BE SURPRISED BY TROUBLE

There are two things about this world that we must never forget. First, it is a broken, fallen world. It has been since Eden, and with the curse that resulted from the fall came pain, hardship, suffering and death. No one, man or woman, Christian or non-Christian, lucky or unlucky, is going to go through this life without experiencing hardship, pain, loss and death.

We have this curious propensity for thinking that everything ought to work right in this world and that life should go along smoothly. We think when things don't work the way they should, when people don't behave as they should, when we hit patches where life just seems to go consistently and perversely wrong, that we must be doing something wrong or God has abandoned us. Do you think something is wrong when weeds crop up in your garden, when aphids show up on your plants? You're silly if you do. That's how our world is. Weeds crop up and pests are ever present. That is the way of a broken world. Job 5:7 says, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward." Psalm 90:10 says, "The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow." Your life will have trouble!

The second factor we must remember is that followers of Jesus have an active enemy in this world who never stops trying to mow us down. His assault on the disciples was brutal and merciless. We should not be surprised when he attacks us with trials, stresses,

disappointments, losses, problems, obstacles, setbacks, opposition, rejection and outright persecution. That's part of this life.

BE BOLD

The big message of this passage is that Jesus wants us to be bold, to be of good cheer, to not lose heart in the face of the storm but to trust him and forge ahead with courage and confidence. In his novel *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry depicts a character in the fictional town of Port William whose name was Roy Overhold. Berry describes him as a man who was "merely not present...In all his life he never did anything that surprised Port William...I don't think he ever surprised himself...As a rule when the pressure was on, Roy eased away. He was not by nature a man who was very much in evidence."

Jesus doesn't want us to be like Roy, people not in evidence, a person basically not present. He doesn't want us to ease away when the pressure is on. He wants us to be people much in evidence, to be always present, to not lose heart and to be all there.

We have reason to be of good cheer. This passage gives three. First, we have joy. We have the greatest gift that we could ever receive. By God's grace given to us through his Son we have victory over death. Death is the ultimate reality and the ultimate enemy for us all. If we do not have an answer for death, life will ever be lived under a dark shadow that only grows deeper and more ominous as our days go by. Every loss of a loved one is a shattering, permanent disaster. And every day is a step closer to the final, horrifying loss.

But we have been given the gift of resurrection, the hope of eternal life. This is the most important possession we can ever have. It is the ultimate hope, the ultimate joy, beside which everything else, the best life has to offer, pales in comparison. In our family we were reminded of this again this week. My mom's brother, Uncle Merle, died suddenly and unexpectedly. He was far and away my favorite uncle. He's been there all my life. It sort of felt like he always would be. And now he's gone. Once again the hope we have is that he's not gone forever. We will see him again because Jesus has won the ultimate victory over death. That's the most important hope and joy one can have.

Second as part of this gift we have a relationship with God. Not just a love relationship, but we have God as our loving Father who cares about us, who listens to us, who can act on our behalf. Some of the most beautiful and powerful of all the words of Scripture are those familiar ones from Psalm 23:4. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff they comfort me." Right, no matter what happens, the Father is right here. No matter how dark it gets, he loves me and he will never abandon me, so I have cause for peace and joy.

Third, Jesus has overcome the world. Yes, I will have trouble, but those difficulties are neither hopeless nor meaningless. **My troubles are an opportunity.** It is a chance to display faith and courage. It is a chance for God to use hardship to make me stronger and better. And it is a chance for me to glorify God. Like Job I have the opportunity to show not just this world, but the spiritual realm that there is someone on this planet who loves God and trusts him no matter what happens. And that brings God great glory.

Recently Laurie and I went to Islands Restaurant. Some friends had given us a gift certificate there and we love that place. While waiting for our food I looked at the television screens they have mounted. They were showing surfers doing their thing on some beautiful waves that ranged from just over head high to double overhead. It is almost mesmerizing to watch those guys carve up those waves. But such surf is difficult and dangerous. I've tried surfing, mostly unsuccessfully. I prefer to paddle out when the surf is a little over ankle high. When it gets more than a couple of feet it presents problems. It is hard to get out through it, it is exhausting and takes a lot of work. And of course there is the danger that if it gets big enough it's going to knock you over and slam your board into your head or drive you into the sand. But here's the thing: there's not much thrill in ankle high surf. And you sure don't see much surfing glory when somebody is surfing a one foot wave. You only really see the beauty and power of surfing when it gets big, and the surfers will tell you that's when it gets really fun because they can generate so much speed and do more with the wave.

So I want you to think of life as being like surfing. The waves are the trouble we will all face. We tend to think that we would prefer to have a lake in front of us. Paddling out will be easy and there will be no danger. But there will be no thrill in it and there will be no glory in it either. Remember the princess stories. **There's no good story if there are no battles to win.** The more intense the battle the more dramatic the story and the more glorious the victory. Jesus wants us to be bold surfers. When the big waves come he wants us to paddle out courageously, for we cannot lose. He goes with us and strengthens us. And as we take on those gigantic swells we will experience the thrill of his presence, and we will display his glory.