

You Think *You've* Got It Bad?

I chose those two readings from II Corinthians to preach from today for a couple of reasons. The most obvious is that they are among the readings suggested by Brian McLaren for today in his book, We Make the Road by Walking, which you all know I have been using this year. But you also know, after having listened to me for over fifteen years now, that I don't feel compelled to follow any pre-existing plan of Scripture readings if I don't think it matches up to what I feel we may need here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church in the circumstances of our real lives. Today, I feel very strongly that Paul's story is at the heart of something that I need to say and that we all need to hear. The situation in the world right now, in our nation, in our state, in our little community, is pretty dire. There is still no guaranteed cure for COVID-19. The death-to-infection rate is still frighteningly high. There is no vaccine. As a result, millions are out of work, the world's economy is staggering, and the road to recovery will almost certainly be rocky. Meanwhile, we are tired of being cooped up, tired of masking up, tired of missing our friends and family and what we considered, just three months ago, to be "normal life." We are, in measures large and small, suffering.

But Paul says to us, as he wrote to the church in Corinth, "Hey, look at me. If anybody's got a right to complain, I do. But I'm writing to tell you that God has used all of the trouble in my life for God's own purposes. The stuff I've been through has made me a more effective messenger of God's love for everyone. And it will do the same for you." That's the message for this morning. I'm now going to spend some time digging into that, but you've already heard the punch line. Our suffering, our self-imposed isolation, our fears for the future, our sorrow over the death and suffering in our world, opens our hearts and helps us know and communicate God's love through Christ Jesus for our whole battered world.

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If you are intrigued by the thesis I've just laid out or if you simply wish to humor me for another fifteen minutes or so, I'm going to take an excursus now into the field of literary theory, or how stories work. Good stories have an underlying structure to which they are faithful. It gives the story an integrity and helps us to enjoy it. Some of these underlying structures can be summed up in a few words: "quest for self-discovery," "boy meets girl," "man vs. nature," and so on. Connie and I have a movie that we like to break out now and then to watch, a romantic comedy called "Stranger Than Fiction." Maybe some of you know it. One of the reasons we love that movie, besides the romance, is how it deals with its own underlying structure. For the vast majority of the movie, the audience is told, quite directly, that the protagonist's story is based on a structure called "Little Did He Know..." Over and over again, the protagonist's actions lead to things he could not have foreseen, but which are brought to his attention by an unseen Voice, played with aplomb by Emma Thompson. "Little did he know that this simple, seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death."

But quite near the end, the movie suddenly reverses field. Rather than being a story in which the structure depends on "Little Did He Know..." it becomes a story which depends on a rather different structure. For ease of concept, let's call this new structure, "And Then..." I'm borrowing that phrase from, among others, songwriters Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, who wrote the immortal hit, "Along Came Jones," for The Coasters. Do you remember it? The first verse and chorus go like this:

"I plopped down in my easy chair and turned on Channel 2

A bad gunslinger called Salty Sam was chasin' poor Sweet Sue

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He trapped her in the old sawmill and said with an evil laugh,

'If you don't give me the deed to your ranch

I'll saw you all in half!'

And then he grabbed her (and then)

He tied her up (and then)

He turned on the bandsaw (and then, and then!)

And then along came Jones

Tall thin Jones

Slow-walkin' Jones

Slow-talkin' Jones

Along came long, lean, lanky Jones"

If you don't know that song, there will be a link to a YouTube version on our website.

Now, there actually is a high-sounding scholarly word for the "And Then..." structure. It's even in Greek, which should thrill the Biblical scholars among us. The word is eucatastrophe.

Eucatastrophe is not a word which appears in Classical Greek or in the Koine Greek of the New Testament. Indeed, it was coined in the Twentieth century by a great scholar of linguistics and literary theory that most people know as a story-teller. His name was J.R.R. Tolkien. Ah-ha, got your attention now, don't I? Tolkien constructed that Greek word, as one does, from three Greek roots: "eu" meaning "good," "kata" meaning "down," and "strophe" meaning "turning." We know the word catastrophe in English meaning a disaster but in its original Greek, it meant a down-turning, an overturning, or a sudden change in direction. In the world of literary criticism, it means the point at which a story suddenly changes, the climax or dénouement. Tolkien's

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eucaastrophe, then, refers to the moment when a story suddenly and unexpectedly changes for the good.

To illustrate the point, let me give you two examples out of Tolkien's own work. In both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, the protagonists and their companions are saved from almost certain death by the eagles, who appear suddenly and carry the hobbits, Bilbo in the first book, Frodo in the latter, and friends to safety. But "The best-known and most fully realized eucaastrophe in Tolkien's work occurs in the climax of The Lord of the Rings." (I'm quoting here from a very good Wikipedia article on eucaastrophe.) "Though victory seems assured for Sauron, the One Ring is permanently destroyed as a result of Gollum's waylaying of Frodo at Mount Doom. Frodo essentially fails his impossible quest at its very end, claiming the Ring for himself – however, at this moment, Gollum suddenly appears, steals the ring, and in his ecstatic gloating falls into the fire. If not for Frodo's previous mercy in sparing Gollum's life (a great risk due to Gollum's obvious treachery, met with bitter protest by Sam), and if not for the Ring's own corruptive influence on Gollum, Sauron would surely have reclaimed it. Thus, Evil is inadvertently and unforeseeably defeated through a small act of kindness and through its own corruptive machinations."

Here's what J.R.R. Tolkien himself wrote about eucaastrophe: "I coined the word 'eucaastrophe': the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears." Tolkien believed that eucaastrophe was best seen in the genre of "fairy story," although his definition of that genre might not be the same as yours or mine. He wrote: "The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden

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joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.” I hope you noticed in that description his use of the words “grace” and “evangelium,” yet another Greek word that we often translate as “Good News” or, of course, “Gospel.” Tolkien included in his genre of “fairy-tale” the work which he loved above all others: the Bible. He also wrote this about eucatastrophe: “the Resurrection was the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible in the greatest Fairy Story – and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love.”

For Tolkien, the Incarnation was the eucatastrophe of salvation history and the Resurrection was the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation. Just when it seemed things couldn't get any darker, unto us a child was born. And then... Just when all seemed lost, the third day dawned, and the women went to his tomb. And then... and then...

I think Paul's litany of sufferings is a lot like that song, “Along Came Jones.” He was thrown into jail by the governor (and then...). He was shipwrecked at sea (and then...). He made it to an island (and then...). He was bitten by a snake (and then... and then...). And then he was able

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to preach the love of God to the inhabitants of Malta and formed a Christian fellowship that endures to this day. Or there was the time he was arrested in Philippi (and then...). And they beat him with rods in public (and then...). And they threw him in jail (and then...). There was an earthquake (and then... and then...). And he told the jailer and his family about the love of God for them and they gave their lives to God and the European mission was off to a flying start. Paul's life is example after example of eucatastrophe. Just when it seems all is lost, God acts. "When nothing else could help, love lifted me."

My friend and former pastor, the Rev. Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker, has this to say in his analysis of this passage in his book, Strength in Weakness: "Is Paul complaining? Is he a hypochondriac or a masochist who enjoys his sufferings and loves talking about them? No, in these catalogs, as well as other passages, Paul uses the language of affliction as he becomes a "kind of poet." His voice turns to the sad and sweet song of the wounded being redeemed by a crucified and risen Lord. It is the song of a world groaning in travail waiting for the redemption of the children of God, knowing that its sufferings are not worth being compared to the glory that is to come."

So, here's the thing, y'all: our lives may seem pretty tough right now but nobody's beating us with rods or taking a whip to our backs. Yes, we're all sick and tired of self-isolation and social distance and all the rest of it but, so far, we've all been spared the really bad stuff. But even if some of us do get sick, even if some of us die, we know how this turns out. For the world, the eucatastrophe has already come. It came when Jesus was born and taught and healed all over Galilee and was killed in Jerusalem and was raised to live again. We live now in that already-but-not-yet Beloved Community of those who follow him. And in our own lives, we can make

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this time of hardship our eucatastrophe. We will look back and say, see! See how God's love sustained us and encouraged us and inspired us to love others even more deeply and effectively! See how we didn't accept the grace of God in vain but learned to work with God to tell others of God's love! See how, like Paul, we endured and so inspired others to endure, how we put the safety of others above our own desires to get out and about and served as a good example to our families and community. See how, even when we felt tired and weak and worn, we followed the example of our Precious Lord and stayed faithful to our calling to be a part of healing the world.

My sisters and my brothers, we are living through a difficult time, I do not mean to belittle the fear and sorrow that threaten to overwhelm us. I feel it, too. But we have a refuge in the love of Jesus, and he is the eucatastrophe, he is the "and then..." We, like all of creation, are in travail but our sufferings are not worth being compared to the glory that is to come. Our Redeemer says to us, "Fear not, I am with thee, be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid." Let us take hope for we *can* endure, and God *will* continue to bless us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.