

12.19.2021 Advent 4 (Philippians 4:4-7)

Jane Marczewski is a 30-year-old singer/songwriter who performed this year on America's Got Talent. At her audition in June she received a Golden Buzzer, which meant she'd be able to proceed directly to the live shows, but in August, before she was able to compete in the quarterfinals, she withdrew from the competition because of her worsening health. You see, over the last four years Jane Marczewski, who performs under the stage name as Nightbirde, has been battling cancer. In 2017, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. In 2018, she was declared cancer-free. In 2019, her cancer recurred and doctors told her that she had 3 to 6 months to live. Then, in 2020 she was again declared cancer-free, but prior to her audition, she was told that the cancer had metastasized to her lungs, spine, and liver, and her chance of survival was set at 2%.

Jane is an incredibly gifted writer. Months ago I read one of her blog posts, and I'd like to share a portion of it with you today. It's titled *God is on the Bathroom Floor*. Jane writes, "I have had cancer three times now, and I have barely passed thirty. There are times when I wonder what I must have done to deserve such a story. I fear sometimes that when I die and meet with God, that He will say I disappointed Him, or offended Him, or failed Him. Maybe He'll say I just never learned the lesson, or that I wasn't grateful enough. But one thing I know for sure is this: *He can never say that He did not know me.*

"I am God's downstairs neighbor, banging on the ceiling with a broomstick. I show up at His door every day. Sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses. Sometimes apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under the mat to let myself in. Other times, I sulk outside until He opens the door to me Himself.

"I have called Him a cheat and a liar, and I meant it. I have told Him I wanted to die, and I meant it. Tears have become the only prayer I know. Prayers roll over my nostrils and drip down my forearms. They fall to the ground as I reach for Him. These are the prayers I repeat night and day; sunrise, sunset.

"Call me bitter if you want to—that's fair. Count me among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened. But count me also among the friends of God. For I have seen Him in rare form. I have felt His exhale, laid in His shadow, squinted to read the message He wrote for me in the grout: "I'm sad

too...”

“Call me cursed, call me lost, call me scorned. But that’s not all. Call me chosen, blessed, sought-after. Call me the one who God whispers His secrets to... Even on days when I’m not so sick, sometimes I go lay on the mat in the afternoon light to listen for Him. I know it sounds crazy, and I can’t really explain it, but God is in there—even now. I have heard it said that some people can’t see God because they won’t look low enough, and it’s true. If you can’t see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor.”

One of the paradoxes of the Christian faith is that we often find the God of hope (Romans 15:13), the Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6), the joy of the Lord (John 15:11), and God who is love (1 John 4:16) in the midst of life’s most difficult circumstances. Jane Marczewski has cancer in her lungs, spine, and liver. Doctors set her chance of survival at 2%, yet she writes, “Call me chosen, blessed, sought-after... Count me among the friends of God... Call me the one who God whispers His secrets to.” What we recognize in her example is the truth that hope, peace, joy, and love are not found in our circumstances, but in our Lord.

We see that in Jane’s example, consider also these examples from the life of St. Paul. After Paul and Silas were arrested in Philippi, the magistrates gave orders to “*beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison...*” (Acts 16:23), and at “*about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them*” (Acts 16:25). Paul and Silas prayed and praised God because their hope was not in that prison, but in their Lord.

When St. Paul “*pleaded with the Lord,*” praying three times for that “*thorn in the flesh*” to be removed, and God, instead of removing the thorn responded, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness,*” and God’s response led Paul declare, “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me*” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). St. Paul could boast, he could brag about his weaknesses, because he knew that the peace of God is not found in freedom from heartache and pain, but instead in the presence of our Lord and in the power of Christ.

When St. Paul was being held as a prisoner by the Romans, he wrote these

words we read in the Epistle this morning, “*Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice*” (Philippians 4:4). Once again, notice the fact that Paul’s hope, peace, and in this verse, his joy wasn’t found in his current circumstance. His joy could not be held captive, because his joy was in the Lord. St. Paul rejoiced *in the Lord* always, and he calls us to do the same.

As we reflect on these examples, Jane Marczewski meeting with Almighty God on the bathroom floor... Paul gladly accepting his weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon him... he and Silas praying and praising God in a first-century prison cell... As we consider these examples we are reminded that the goal of the Christian faith is not to make this life perfect. The goal of “*the Faith once delivered to the saints*” (Jude 1:3) is to restore our relationship with God.

We were made by God, and for intimacy with Him, yet because of the Fall, as Pascal stated, there is a “God-shaped” hole in all of us. Overcoming that emptiness, and experiencing Jesus personally, is the key to living a deeply fulfilled, and eternally significant life that transcends this world. Oswald Chambers once wrote, “There is only one relationship that really matters, and that is your personal relationship to your personal Redeemer and Lord. If you maintain that at all costs, letting everything else go, God will fulfill His purpose through your life. One individual life may be of priceless value to God’s purposes, and yours may be that life.”

What you find in the examples we talked about this morning are Christians who “let everything else go” in order to maintain, nurture, and protect the one relationship that really matters, their intimate, life-saving, life-giving, life-transforming relationship with our Savior Christ, and there is a very real sense in which the message of Advent is “let everything else go” and hold on to your relationship with our Lord. Let everything else go, and prepare yourself for an encounter with Him. St. Paul expressed that truth this way, saying, “*I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...*” (Philippians 3:8-9).

Jane Marczewski lost her good health, but found God on the bathroom floor. St. Paul and Silas lost their freedom and later their lives, but gained Christ

and were found in Him. Hope, peace, joy, and love are not found in our circumstances, but in our Lord. As the season of Advent comes to an end, and we turn our thoughts toward Christmas, may God give us grace to let go of our own trials and sorrows and difficulties and distractions, so that we may take hold of Him and know Him intimately, that we may be His downstairs neighbor, that we “*may gain Christ and be found in Him.*”