

[PRAYER] [BLANK] I am sorry that this is not a day that may be joyful for many people. Our loss of Jeanne Beth Willett-King, our very loved church member and friend, is a tragedy that tears into our hearts deeply. We will celebrate her life, and her eternal life, with her family, in this place, Thursday, at 10. And here, today, we will try to explore the same question that Jeanne struggled with, and that we all struggle with, sometimes: how can I endure? How can I live through what seems like a never-ending series of events that can rob us of our spirit, and our joy?

We ask this today in part because Jeanne was so loved for being such a powerful ambassador for God’s everlasting joy. From her singing, her teaching our children, her deep friendships with our church community and our local community, and her encouraging us in faith, Jeanne was a powerful ambassador for Christ. Yet, in the middle of her powerful Christian witness, she struggled to endure. I don’t think that her struggles were in spite of her faith. She endured her struggles using her faith. Faith was her wonderful tool of joy to help her endure life’s challenges.

Every day we have choices as to how we’re going to live our lives. Often, we don’t have a choice about the challenges that we face when we make our choices. Stacks of bills may look just as high as the other day, or higher. Our own health problems, or those of our loved ones, may seem just as bad, or perhaps even worse. And on any day, news headlines are trying to sell us the latest scandal, the latest tragedy, the latest evil outrage, things that can consume our joy, if we let them. No, we don’t have a lot of choice in what today will bring us. But we do get to choose what we bring to today, through our faith.

As we read today in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, the lives of faithful people in the Old Testament gave them choices that needed faith. Yes, there were moments of triumph, like when Moses led the Israelites through the parted seas, and other moments of great leadership. But there were also moments of tragedy, and punishment, and torture, and banishment, and brutal executions, for people of faith who stood by the one true God in the face of evil. Many of the early Christians reading about these leaders of faith in this letter had experienced these things, too, because they chose, day by day, to stand by the same God revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus offered them something to help them endure that the leaders in the Old Testament did not have: the hope of everlasting joy now, through Jesus. Hebrews says, “God provided something better for us so they wouldn’t be made perfect without us.” Jesus is God’s eternal answer to today that God’s power to help us endure in God’s joy will never die, today or tomorrow, or ever, a promise forged on a cross and in an empty grave, in Jesus.

Jesus is God’s promise that God’s joy will always endure. Jesus has revealed to us, in the New Testament, and in God’s living presence today, on this earth, the ultimate ending to God’s story. The ending is this: God wins. God will always win. God will never lose. The only question is when, and how deeply, we will receive that story with joy in our hearts, and make it our story. And when we accept God’s story as the story of our lives, the lives that we live now, then we will know what it takes to endure anything, and everything, always, including our human limitations, limitations that define the boundaries of our part

in God’s story. In God’s story, God has revealed that we will always fall short. We will always stumble. We will always have arms way too short to box with God. And through faith in Jesus Christ, we will always have a God who will remind us in the middle of our limitations, “That’s OK. I made you that way. You’re not Jesus. But you can be a piece of Jesus, a morsel of Christ, a piece of the puzzle that turns into God’s eternal joy on earth, as it is already in heaven. And I will help you, every day, always.”

God will help us, and everyone, to endure, as a morsel of Christ, every single day. God will help us to endure, in Christ. It seems pretty simple, but it may not always be easy, because it will mean that we have to make hard choices, at times. To make choices that lead to enduring joy, we need to accept that we need more than ourselves, or a group of people who we feel most comfortable with, to find that endurance in Jesus. The early Christians who heard the letter to the Hebrews were tight, small groups, yet they were together not because of the most natural bonds of friendship, or family ties, but because they had decided to become adopted members of God’s family. And God’s family challenges us to become someone more as a morsel of Christ than our human limitations would ask us to be.

[SHIP] In 1914, the English explorer Ernest Shackleton set sail for Antarctica in a wooden ship, with a crew of 28 men. The ship was named *Endurance*. Their plan was to land on one side of Antarctica, and to cross the entire continent, by way of the South Pole. That was their plan to endure, and find joy. But it was not God’s plan. Their ship became trapped in thick sea ice, and was crushed by the ice, as if it were just a toothpick. They barely escaped with their lives, a few lifeboats, and some limited supplies. They were a tight crew, and well led. But they were called to an entirely different mission of endurance.

Led by Shackleton, they dragged their lifeboats across the sea ice, until it began to break up beneath them, near the open ocean. They rowed as best they could to a barren island, where penguins lived. Without a radio, through, far from civilization, they were as good as dead. So they rigged up one of the lifeboats as a crude sailboat, and Shackleton, with two of his crew, sailed nine hundred miles through the worst ocean storms on the planet, to the small and rugged island of South Georgia. Two of them crossed the steep, snowy mountains of the island, and reached a whaling ship base on the far side of the island. Then, in the middle of World War One, they convinced the British government to send a ship to rescue the stranded crew. In 1916, a ship arrived at Elephant Island in Antarctica. [CREW] All 28 men of the ship *Endurance* had endured a mission that God had prepared for them, that led to their joyful rescue. Even with their enormous efforts together, even with all of their trust, and waiting, salvation was in God’s hands. [BLANK]

This is the endurance that God calls us into, through faith in Jesus Christ. Christian endurance is not holding out until we get what we want. Christian endurance is holding on to God, until God brings us into what God wants. Christian endurance is not about holding out for the victory in front of our family, our friends, or our community, or the media. Christian endurance is about holding on for God’s victory over our hearts, and over our choices that we make with our heart, as we expand the horizons of our joy far beyond who and what could possibly provide them. When salvation in Christ is our goal for endurance,

our choices that lead us to God’s joy change, fundamentally.

Jesus, the Son of God, and the Son of humanity, knew this. He warns his followers today in our reading from Luke’s gospel that our most trusted and intimate human relationships would be drastically affected by our choice to endure on God’s promises of joy in Jesus. All of a sudden, our families may not be our families the way that they used to be. Jesus doesn’t want to hurt our families. But Jesus knows what’s coming for our families, and all of the families of the world. Like a wooden ship waiting to be crushed by thick ice, we can miss the signs of the times that God had put right in front of our noses. Many things that we have counted on for our endurance will not endure. They will not bring us God’s joy. Our tightest human relationships as the focus of our lives will not endure to deliver us into the joy of salvation in Jesus. Without Jesus as the center of our common salvation, our common mission, our lives made common and of one piece in Jesus, then we will never be a part of God’s story of salvation in Jesus, meant not just for us, but for all of God’s world.

Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming for all of God’s world. Jesus has a boat waiting to offer us salvation. But the boat only comes when we ask for salvation, and endure in God’s promises. And the boat brings us to a world at war with God, that needs salvation. We will need a bigger boat for Jesus than we have asked for, or imagined. By God’s grace, and in God’s Holy Spirit, we can build it, together, for us, and for all of God’s world. I invite you to endure in Jesus, and to be the people who invite everyone we can into God’s joy of salvation, in Jesus. Amen.