

**“When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come.
But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish
because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.”**

John 16:21

Sorrow Will Turn into Joy

JOHN 16:16–24 ¹⁶“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying to us, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and ‘Because I am going to the Father’?” ¹⁸They said, “What does he mean by this ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’?” ²⁰Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²²So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

The gospel highlights the importance of Jesus' revelation to his disciples by its threefold repetition: "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me" (verses 16–19). Holding his listeners in suspense, Jesus tells them that his death will mean a painful separation from them for a while, but he will meet them again, an experience that will bring them great joy. Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman earlier in the gospel, the disciples are unable to see beyond their immediate experience to grasp the deeper significance of Jesus' words: "We do not know what he is talking about."

As the gospel continues, the disciples will be shown that the first "little while" leads to Jesus' death and exaltation on the cross. During this in-between time, the disciples "will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice" (verse 20). His death will seem to be a victory for those who are lined up against Jesus and refuse to believe. Yet, "again a little while" and they will "see" Jesus again, and their pain will be turned to joy. Somehow, as Jesus has said, it is to their advantage that he leave them; otherwise the Advocate will not come to them.

Jesus emphasizes that their joy cannot come without being preceded by grief. Only God is able to turn such sorrow into joy, as proclaimed in Jeremiah: "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow" (Jer 31:13). Jesus illustrates this dynamic with a woman's experience of childbirth (verse 21). Although the labor preceding birth is fraught with pain and anxiety because her "hour" has come, when the child is born the anguish is overcome with joy. Most mothers can validate Jesus' analogy about the pains and joys of pregnancy and giving birth. The nine months of suffering seem a small price to pay for the exquisite joy of giving birth to a child. Likewise, Jesus' promise to us of ultimate joy from one who knows all about pain is great consolation.

Seeing Jesus again on the other side of the cross in the resurrection appearances will certainly bring great joy to the disciples and inaugurate the age in which the Advocate will bring them vision and understanding. Yet, the church to which this gospel is written is also living in the in-between time, which is marked by the world's hatred, social exclusion, persecution, and martyrdom. The experience of childbirth, the cross of Jesus, must be experienced again and again by disciples of Jesus. Joy cannot come without being preceded by grief.

In the midst of the grief of believers, the one who has been lifted up will be with them through the Advocate in the church's experience of worship. In this

in-between time, as the disciples pray to the Father in the name of Jesus, they will ask and receive. During this ambiguous time of both suffering and joy, Jesus says over and over again to his worshiping church, “So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (verse 22). In prayer and worship, in baptism and Eucharist, the risen One is present through his Holy Spirit to give his people joy, comfort, hope, and peace, until he comes in glory.

Reflection and discussion

- When have I experienced pain followed by joy? How does suffering intensify the joy that follows?
- In what way is the experience of the cross like childbirth? Why is the cross necessary both for Jesus and for his disciples?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, because you are lifted up and have returned to the Father, you have sent your Spirit to your church. Lead me to experience the joy, peace, and hope given by your Spirit within me. Prepare me to see you and to know the joy that does not end.