

When I first decided to become a pastor, I knew that every holiday into the future was going to change. Growing up, my family had some beautiful traditions to celebrate the holidays, Christmas in particular. As a kid, we would always go to the candlelight Christmas Eve church service and sing Silent Night, open presents at my grandma's house, and Christmas Day brought gifts from Santa and lots of homemade treats and yummy food, and time together with family.

So when my family and I started to piece together what being a pastor would logistically mean, we realized that many of these traditions would no longer be able to happen. Some of these things are okay with me, especially not having to listen to Jim Brickman's Christmas albums on constant repeat for 5 weeks every year. But some were harder to adapt to. Since I am working and have many services and celebrations for Christmas, I can't be at my parents' house at the same time. It is an absolute joy to be among so many faithful and joyful people celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas, it just took some adjusting from one set of traditions to another.

The thing that helped and comforted me and my family in the midst of this transition, though, was knowing that Jesus was still going to be born on Christmas and that's a beautiful thing. Just because we don't have our traditional lasagna dinner or gift opening or Elf viewing on Christmas Eve itself doesn't mean Christmas is cancelled. Nothing will change that reality of Jesus Christ, our Savior, Emmanuel, God With Us, coming into the world in a humble and beautiful and life-giving, world-shaking way, that we celebrate every December. And that gift of the life of Jesus is strong enough to help us not only in this transition of family traditions, but in any transition that we may have to endure in life.

I realize it's maybe a little bit early to be talking about Christmas in my sermons. Time does feel like a farce these days though - how did it get to be the end of August?! But many of us are going through a lot of transitions

related to our professional, academic, or just living life itself, and it's important to highlight that Jesus is still with us in the midst of all of it. This whole season of pandemic, fighting for racial justice, keeping our families and loved ones safe and healthy, and of transition and change on every level of our lives certainly provides us with challenges. It can feel sometimes like our circumstances are about to swallow us whole. But we find our life itself in following Jesus Christ. We have to trust in Jesus' presence and love and life and light no matter what challenges or transitions we face. It is our faith in the God of all time and place, of steadfast love and promises that endure forever, for all generations, that give us that saving of our lives that we so desperately need.

I think The Rev. Dr. Joy Moore, a preaching professor at Luther Seminary said it best when she wrote: *If you hold too tightly to the things God has provided you—trusting the gift and not the giver—you could lose everything. But God is faithful. And so even if you find you have lost everything, trust God. Trust Jesus.*

What Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel story is that our trust and our faith must be in God, and not just the things God has given us. It's about a relationship with God, because of God's steadfast love, not just what we gain or the things we get from God. Our trust is in an ever-moving, ever-loving, ever-steadfast, everlasting God of all creation, beyond what we could imagine or confine, and for our God we give unending thanks.

Jesus gives us this lesson on trusting God in his conversation with Peter. Peter, and the rest of Jesus' disciples who were with them, started to hear Jesus talking about his death and rising again and, naturally, became very alarmed. Imagine if your friend and teacher and leader who you loved started saying that they had to undergo great suffering at the hands of the authorities and then be killed! It makes sense that Peter was not about to stand for this, he did not want his beloved Messiah to be tormented and killed. But Jesus knew there was more to the story than just what made

sense to Peter in that moment. Jesus knew that God, His heavenly Father was at the center of this plan. Even though it meant he must endure great suffering, Jesus trusted God, and leaned into His relationship with God. I can't even imagine how challenging that would have been, for Jesus or His disciples.

In the midst of laying this foundation to trust God, to trust the divine things, Jesus also goes on to say that for those who want to become His followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it. So what does it mean to take up our cross, or lose our life for Jesus' sake? What crosses do we bear?

The crosses we bear are the challenges that get in the way of our relationship with God. Our crosses are the heavy things that threaten the painful separation between us and God. Our crosses are the false idols that we worship and put our life value in instead of worshipping and trusting God our Creator. Our crosses are the challenges we have to face each day to keep ourselves alive. Our crosses are the human things that keep us from focusing on the divine things.

The cross in the time of Jesus was a sign of torture and pain - it was a tool used to physically break bodies to the point of death. Our crosses now mean two things. First, in this metaphor of taking up our own crosses, our crosses are also often sources of deeper pain. These false idols, of the hustle, the perfectionism, the security, of anything that we worship and live into above God, these lead to suffering and hurt. Everyone has their own crosses to bear, and each of us have struggles in keeping God at our center from time to time. Even Peter, Jesus' disciple, struggled to keep the plan for Christ and will of God in mind, and challenged the cross Jesus was to bear. Even though that cross would lead to new life for all people, the forgiveness of all sin for all people, Peter put what he knew above what the Son of Man had to do for the greater communion of people. It's part of

being human, we are fallible and it can be hard to trust God in all times and places. Denying what is easy and indulges ourselves for the sake of loving God and neighbor is certainly challenging. But we must do our best to try, to tangibly act in love towards God and neighbor, and truly love God and our neighbors as much or more than we love ourselves.

The second meaning of the cross for us now is a powerful symbol of the new life given to us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross, the pain and suffering that Jesus endured at the hands of the authorities was not the end of the road. The cross did not defeat Jesus or God or creation or life itself. Because of God's holy and creative power, death itself was defeated on that cross and in the empty tomb on Easter morning. Because of Jesus' resurrection in the human body we as humans are given the promise of everlasting life. Because of God's promises, there is absolutely nothing in heaven or on Earth that will ever separate us from the holy and life-giving, life-saving love of God. Because of God's powerful love we too have the strength to carry our crosses and cast them down at the feet of Jesus for the sake of our lives. Because of Jesus, we find our lives, and we have life abundant.

Following Jesus is not always easy. Denying ourselves and naming and taking up our crosses, the things that keep us from God and cause us pain, is one of the hardest things we face. But it is worth it. Following Jesus means we find our lives, no matter how hard our circumstances may be. We find our lives by taking up our crosses and casting these burdens at the feet of Jesus. We find our lives by trusting the movements of God in our world. We find our lives by keeping love of God and love of neighbor in all we do. We find our lives when we get out of our own heads and our own suffering and instead lean on the One who gives us hope in new life. The new life in Jesus is the life we are promised.

So how do we follow Jesus? How do we nurture our relationship with God? Paul gives us some of the most important and impactful ways we can in our

Romans text today. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. And most of all - rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Even in the hardest seasons and transitions of life, Christ is still with us. We have reason to rejoice, in the new life He gives us. God is with us in the cross-bearing, God is with us in the joy of Easter morning, God is with us in God's Son, Jesus Christ. For the sure promises of life and love and He brings, we give thanks to God. Amen.