

1 Peter 4:12-17 5:6-11

(Evangelical Heritage Version)

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised by the fiery trial that is happening among you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you. ¹³Instead rejoice whenever you are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

¹⁴If you are insulted in connection with the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or as a meddler. ¹⁶But if you suffer for being a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God in connection with this name. ¹⁷For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God. Now if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who disobey the gospel of God?

^{5:6}Therefore humble yourselves under God's powerful hand so that he may lift you up at the appointed time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Have sound judgment. Be alert. Your adversary, the Devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him by being firm in the faith. You know that the same kinds of sufferings are being laid on your brotherhood all over the world.

¹⁰After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you. ¹¹To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Do Not Be Surprised

I.

Throughout these Sundays of Easter we have been following the readings from 1 Peter. Have you noticed any repetition?

“Live like a Christian.” That’s been consistent throughout the Second Lesson of the last few weeks. There will be trials in the life of a Christian. That, too, has been an oft repeated theme. The last few weeks Peter has really been hitting suffering for doing good.

That last one seems a bit strange to 21st Century American ears. It is an offense to our sensibilities that someone might be penalized while—or even *because of*—doing something we consider to be good.

Peter says: “Dear friends, do not be surprised by the fiery trial that is happening among you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12, EHV). The term “fiery trial” immediately makes us think of Christians who were burned at the stake because of their faith. But that only happened in days gone by, right?

Throughout the history of the Christian Church persecution of Christians has been the norm. At the time Peter was writing, persecutions were relatively mild events, but Peter was anticipating that they would become more severe. He was prophetic. Peter himself had to face terrible persecution. Tradition has it that Peter was crucified because of his faith; he was said to be crucified upside down.

II.

Peter wanted his readers—both then and now—to realize that persecution of Christians should not be viewed as strange. He says: “Your adversary, the Devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, EHV). The devil, the world, and the sinful flesh are not merely passive when it comes to believers, they want to destroy us.

We have been blessed in American society that physical persecution for being a Christian is rare. Is it not the case, however, that Christians are routinely mocked and ridiculed because of their faith? Identify yourself as a creationist and you will be laughed at. A pro-life label will get you branded as a hater of women. State the biblical truth that homosexuality is not within God's standards, and that even heterosexual sex outside of marriage is sinful, and you will be branded as unloving and behind the times.

Go back to what Peter said to open this lesson: "Dear friends, do not be surprised by the fiery trial that is happening among you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12, EHV). Though Satan is out there roaring away with his persecution, trying to scare you, Peter says that God has his own purpose in allowing such persecutions. They are "to test you."

In fact, persecutions are actually a great blessing. "If you are insulted in connection with the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14, EHV).

III.

Notice that Peter doesn't say that suffering in and of itself is something to be desired. He uses another one of his recurring themes: "Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or as a meddler. ¹⁶But if you suffer for being a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God in connection with this name" (1 Peter 4:15-16, EHV).

A person might suffer with imprisonment or even receive the death penalty for committing crimes. Those who receive guilty verdicts as murderers or thieves or other criminal behavior simply are receiving the just punishment for their crimes. There is nothing honorable in that. On the other hand, if you suffer because you are acting like and living like a Christian, *that* kind of suffering you can wear as a badge of honor.

Why is it that suffering for Christ can be such an honor? "Rejoice whenever you are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13, EHV). Jesus suffered first. Suffering because of the Name of Christ is a badge of honor because of what Jesus' suffering means. *Your* sins were there on the cross with Jesus. Carrying *your sins* he endured the mocking and the spitting and the flogging in the courtroom of Pilate and by the soldiers standing around watching him die. He wasn't suffering for his *own* misdeeds. He wasn't there out of any sense of obligation. He was there because of love. He loved *you*; that is why he suffered. Suffering because of Jesus is an honorable thing.

However...strange as it may seem, sometimes Christians *want* the notoriety of being arrested for their faith. They go out of their way to use Christianity to defend their civil disobedience. Suffering for Christ is an honor, but it is an honor we cannot seek.

The early Christian Church had to begin teaching that Christians should avoid persecution if they could do so without compromising their faith. It was wrong, for example, to end up being a martyr and dying for the faith if a person had the opportunity to escape. Of course, then and now, if a Christian would be confronted and arrested, the believer is to confess Christ.

IV.

"If you suffer for being a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God in connection with this name" (1 Peter 4:16, EHV). What gives a person the strength—the fortitude of character—to take it, to handle the suffering? Really we aren't able to preserve ourselves in faith; we aren't able to keep ourselves from true harm.

What is true harm? True harm is denying Christ. We cannot save ourselves from that.

Pride goes before a fall, goes the saying. Though Peter didn't know the saying, he knew the reality. His pride had pushed to the forefront as he boldly declared that he would *never* deny Jesus, only to do so mere hours later. Peter denied, and Jesus later restored him. At that restoration event, Jesus asked Peter multiple times: "Do you love me?" (John 21:16, EHV). Jesus asked the question using the "agape" word for love—the word that means unconditional love, love that loves even when love isn't deserved. Peter used a different word for his answer; he knew he couldn't answer using the same word Jesus did, because his love wasn't that powerful—that complete.

Now he says to his readers: "Therefore humble yourselves under God's powerful hand so that he may lift you up at the appointed time" (1 Peter 5:6, EHV). *That* is the way the Christian is preserved. *That* is the way the Christian suffers for the Name of Christ. "Humble yourselves." Don't think you have all the answers. Don't rely on your own strength of character to stand up under *any* kind of persecution you might face as a Christian—whether the kind that threatens your life, or just the mocking and ridicule you endure for believing what the Bible says. "Humble yourselves" and God himself will "lift you up at the appointed time." God will see you through. God will give you the strength to endure. And *God* will give you relief from all your struggles at the time he sees fit and in the way he considers best.

As we move from the Easter season into Pentecost, the part of the church year that focuses on the Christian life, we are reminded here by Peter that the Christian is always under pressure from the world. The world does not want to be confronted with its own sin or its own inhumanity.

Christians have always been under attack. Before every piece of news dealt with the Covid pandemic and all the ramifications that came with it, there were news reports about Christians in the Middle East and Africa who were losing their lives because of their faith. Persecution in other forms was and is ongoing. In fact, Jesus himself told us we could expect to be ridiculed and persecuted because we follow him.

Do not be surprised. But also do not be afraid. While there is nothing strange about being persecuted, Christ, who suffered all, will always be right there beside you. Stand with Christ, because Christ stands with you.

Never will you be left to stand on your own. God is our Creator and Redeemer and Sanctifier. He is the God of all grace. He will restore, confirm, strengthen, and keep us. Amen.