

May 24, 2020
Suffering As a Christian
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I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

First Peter is a pastoral letter written from Rome to churches in Asia Minor some time in the first century. Some say before the Apostle Peter was martyred. Others say no way could it be that early. Silvanus is mentioned in the signature. He was a known associate of Peter. It's possible he wrote it on Peter's behalf. Whoever wrote it uses symbolic language here and there, referring to Rome as *Babylon*. John does the same in the book of Revelation. The churches are addressed as *parademos*, exiles, temporary residents of a place that is not their home – like the Jews in Babylon or, in the case of the New Testament church, believers, Christ-followers, anywhere this side of heaven.

Those churches were going through something the letter described as a *fiery ordeal*. Writing from Rome, we can assume the apostle was in prison, so *fiery ordeal* probably wasn't much of an exaggeration. Around that same time, the Apostle Paul was in/out of prison, shipwrecked, beaten, snake-bit, and it wasn't Romans harassing him so much as his fellow Jews. Suffice it to say, *fiery ordeal* probably covered a multitude of situations and conditions folks were going through then – and now. Situations and conditions people are always going through. The churches had need of encouragement. Our text today is one tiny slice of that encouragement.

Let's pray and take a look: *Never beyond your reach, O God, never any place you cannot find us. Never lost. Never too far gone. Forever fully known. Always in your sight and covered by your love, made plain to us in Jesus Christ. Make us ever humble enough and wise enough to put ourselves back into your light. Amen.*

My oldest child was one year too old to be vaccinated against chickenpox. She got a hateful case of it before she was two. My mother sent her a Barney-the-dinosaur toy which we had to bribe her to wash. My mom reminded me that in 1972 or 1973, when I was in third or fourth grade, she (mother) and her best friend, Eileen, decided to vaccinate their five young kids against chickenpox. They had us visit and play with some kids who already had it, with the plan that we'd be sick over Christmas break and not miss too much school. It mostly worked. My sister Cathy was sick the whole Christmas break, and then my brother Tony and I missed two weeks of school in January after all.

Two hundred years before I had chickenpox, Abigail Adams decided to vaccinate her four kids against smallpox, at their country home outside Boston. After she made them throw up every day for a week, Dr. Bullfinch came over, cut a little incision into their arms and inserted a pustule of active smallpox from another patient, then waited for the children to get sick, hoping they'd only have a mild case. One of her boys had to be re-infected three times before he got sick, but in the end they all survived. It's gross to think about, definitely. Not as gross as the terror that your children will die in agony of an incurable disease.

It is our time, friends. Our time to be brave and to be patient. And to see our own lives in light of human history. The fact that this is the first quarantine of our lives does not make us special – either in light of history or in light of the world right now. And it is not the task of the church to prop up some illusion or delusion that life will soon be back to normal. This IS normal. For the beloved of God around the world and in our own city, hardship dictated by forces outside one's control is normal.

All over the world, US included, parents drop bleach tablets in their water to kill the parasites that cause the dysentery that will kill their babies and make their kids really sick. Typhoid, cholera, Ebola; HIV AIDS and tuberculosis; hookworms – all diseases with good treatment, for people who can get it and afford it. To them, a new virus to navigate is just one more thing.

And the afflictions that decimate populations like a disease: gun violence, drug addiction, drug trafficking, drug crime, mass incarceration, human slavery, war – for all the people dealing with these, a new virus is just one more thing. And then there is corruption. Corruption. Corrup-tion. Corruption. Political Corruption, Economic Corruption, Social Corruption, Religious Corruption – anywhere, any time power given for the benefit of everyone is wielded to benefit oneself. And to the people navigating the frustration of corruption, this new virus is just one more thing.

As well, friends, as well, I would invite you to recognize this pandemic of ours as just one more thing come 'round in history to invite us to open the door to that roaring lion the writer speaks of in chapter five. He was in prison in Rome, remember. Maybe he could hear the lions from his cell. I don't hear lions. I hear the ice cream in my freezer.

Maybe you hear the talking heads on cable news. Maybe you hear the poet of Proverbs 24 calling from your bed: *A little sleep and a little slumber, a little folding of the hands.*

The pandemic may sound like a new song. It is actually just a new verse of the same song with which the world continues to invite us to be anxious, to lose heart. The world has no incentive to stop inviting. The more it invites, the more we buy. But neither will the Word, neither will the Word cease to invite us, as it has invited all the generations of God's people before us. The Word invites us to hear and to take up its call NOT to be surprised at the fiery ordeal taking place among us. I really, really, really like that he calls it *the fiery ordeal*. A *fiery ordeal* IS a big deal, but also IS common to all – as much an experience of his grace as the joy and beauty also common to being human.

We are pretty good at glory, amen? Time and again through any given worship service we preach and pray and sing, "*He rose and we will too!*" But he didn't rise from nothing, did he? He rose from death. Suffering, hateful death. He rose and we will too. He suffered and we will too. There is no way around it. But thank God there is a purpose in it. A purpose our privilege can sometimes tempt us to forget. Fifty-plus years without a single quarantine. Fifty-plus years going anywhere we want, anytime we want. That's privilege, friends.

And the question of suffering is this: Will we resent it as some offense we don't deserve? Or shall we receive it as an ordinary part of being human and, in particular, common to the experience of being exiles in a suffering world? Forward, backward, inside and out, the gospel teaches us that Jesus came to us and took human suffering upon himself. He took death upon himself. And by his death and resurrection, suffering has found its purpose, and death lost all its power. Death was put to death.

"How can such a thing be?" any rational person will ask, as well they should in light of this world's continued suffering. To which Fred Craddock, my preacher-teacher would reply with this parable: A farmer and his son were working in a field when the son stepped on a venomous snake. The farmer quickly cut the snake's head off with his hoe and flung the rest over a fence where it continue to writhe and quiver. "Is it dead?" his son asked. "Yes," his father answered, "but it's gonna keep shaking until the sun goes down."

The faithful answer, of course, is *we will receive it*. But receiving it is itself the work, the activity of faith. Work we will not accomplish on the first day, and probably not on the eleventy-first either, as hobbits count. But by bits and pieces, three steps forward and two steps back, through the days of our lives, remembering – as the writer points out – that it is not personal, this suffering, but common to humanity. Just one more thing, as the wise one said in Bible Chat last Thursday.

Just one more moment in the long history of God's people adjusting to our God-given place in this world. *Parademos*: exiles, temporary residents, whose purpose in this place

is to love our neighbors, generously, fiercely if need be, as Jesus taught us with his words and his life. We make it our way of life. As the world continues to shift into the next phase of pandemic in the coming days and weeks, our task does not change: to seek God's will in the best ways to love one another. We are not to worry about tomorrow.

Today's text reminds us to remain alert and sober and to resist this world's temptation to consider our own suffering in some other, more special light than common, as something we – for whatever reason – cannot endure. Because we can, beloved; we can. If the suffering we endure these days is the shape loving our neighbors takes, we can do it for as long as need be.

¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

Then some far day, we also will remember this season as *just one more thing* which God brought us through. Will you pray with me?