The Blessing of Suffering

1 Peter 3.13-22. (St. Michael’s – December 13th 2020)

The Rev. David Booman

2020 has been a year unlike any in recent memory. A year of great uncertainty and suffering. COVID has affected us in so many ways. Physically, emotionally, financially relationally. This Thanksgiving was the strangest Thanksgiving I’ve ever had. The Boomans had rotisserie chicken instead of turkey. A sign of the times, and feels almost sacrilegious.

And so as we come to the close of this year, it’s appropriate that we’ve been in 1st Peter, the letter which has more to do with suffering than any other in the NT. Yes, this small letter contains over 25% of all references to ‘pascho,’ the Greek word for suffering. There are nearly as many references in this letter as in all four gospels combined.

Peter has been thinking a lot about suffering. And his insights are profound. Specifically, he shows us three things.

1. How to prepare for suffering.
2. What to do in the midst of suffering.
3. Where to find the spiritual power to overcome suffering.

First, how do we prepare for suffering? Peter basically says, don’t be surprised by it. In verse 16 he writes, ‘WHEN you are slandered.’ Not if, but WHEN. Later in chapter 4, he says, ‘Don’t be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you…as though something strange were happening to you.’

How much of our suffering is made worse by the fact that we’re surprised by it? We’re caught off guard. Perhaps we assume that Christians don’t suffer. And we forget that we follow a guy who was crucified. As Jesus himself said in John 15 ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.’

So don’t be surprised when suffering comes. And also be aware that there’s often a progression to suffering, especially when it comes to persecution. Persecution often goes from bad to worse. And this is what Peter and his flock were living in real time.

For example, in 41 AD emperor Claudius issued an edict forbidding Jews and Christians to assemble together. A fairly minor persecution. Nothing terrible, but certainly inconvenient.

But then 8 years later, in 49 AD, Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. And they had to find somewhere else to live. Many of them traveled to Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, where Peter wrote them this letter in the 50’s. We’re talking a far more significant persecution.

And then finally, in 64 AD, Nero launches his scorched-earth persecution. Feeding Christians to lions and using them as living torches in the coliseum. And Peter himself is crucified upside down. You can see the terrible progression over the span of 23 years.

Now you might say, all this talk about Christians suffering persecution, that was two thousand years ago. That could never happen today, especially in the America.

There was a very interesting ruling by the Supreme Court two weeks ago. Certain governors were imposing capacity limits on religious gatherings. And the Supreme Court ruled by a 5-4 decision that this was unconstitutional.

And one of the justices, who is NOT some kind of fundamentalist religious zealot, but an episcopalian (!) wrote this, “The Governor has chosen to impose no capacity restrictions on certain businesses he considers ‘essential’…and it turns out the businesses the Governor considers essential include hardware stores, acupuncturists, liquor stores, bicycle repair shops, signage companies, accountants, lawyers, and insurance agents…so…according to the Governor, it may be unsafe to go to church, but it’s always fine to pick up another bottle of wine, shop for a new bike, or spend the afternoon
exploring your distal points and meridians. Who knew public health would so perfectly align with secular convenience."

Isn’t it remarkable and a little eerie? We’re ONE justice away from our governors having executive power to ban religious gatherings like the one we’re having right now.

Remember how persecution can progress. First the emperor forbade gatherings because they were a threat to Pax Romana. A decade later Christians were expelled from places of influence. And a decade after that, they were food for lions.

I’m reminded of the famous quote, by Cardinal Francis George, the former archbishop of Chicago. He said, ‘I expect that I will die in bed. My successor will die in prison, and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help to rebuild civilization, as the church has done so often in human history.’ Don’t be surprised when suffering comes.

But Peter goes further than merely warning us, he also tells us what to do when we’re in the midst of suffering. He says don’t be afraid and let your light shine.

Verse 14, ‘Even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.’ Basically, when people hate you and mistreat you, don’t worry. Remember what Jesus said, ‘Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven.’

But Peter also points out that we need to be suffering for the right reasons. In verse 17 he says, ‘It’s better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil…[and when you defend your faith] do so with gentleness and respect.’

You know, sometimes when I suffer it’s because I’m doing the right thing. But oftentimes when I suffer, it’s because I’m being an obnoxious jerk. And so when you’re suffering, make sure you’re suffering for the right reasons. Don’t compromise, don’t back down, but let your light shine with gentleness and respect.

I recently saw the movie, A Hidden Life. The true story of Franz Jagerstatter, an Austrian farmer who refused to swear allegiance to Hitler. He was married and had three young daughters. While he was in prison his family, friends, and even his priest begged him to sign the oath. They said, ‘It’s just words. It doesn’t matter. God knows your heart. Don’t you think it’s more important to God that you care for your family than that you sign a piece of paper?’

But on August 9th, 1943, hours before he was guillotined, Jagerstatter wrote, ‘Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of Faith. God gives so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering…. People worry about the obligations of conscience as they concern my wife and children. But I cannot believe that, just because one has a wife and children, a man is free to offend God.’

How is it that Christians like Jagerstatter, like Peter’s flock in Asia Minor, could endure with such remarkable poise, with such courage, and gentleness, and respect? This leads us to our third point – Peter shows us where we can find the strength to overcome suffering.

Peter gives us three things. It’s not rocket science, simply the bedrock of the faith: Christ’s death, Christ’s resurrection, and Christ’s ascension.

First Christ’s death. Verse 18: ‘For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the un righteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh.’

In the cross of Christ we see that God really is Emmanuel, He’s not an armchair deity, an ivory tower God. He’s with us in the shadowed valleys, He’s with us in the trenches. The cross shows us that we are precious to God, that we are loved. That our names are literally engraved on the palms of His hands.

And in the cross we see that the primary way the kingdom of God advances is through suffering. As Tertullian recognized, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, and this includes your suffering and mine. It can be redemptive. As the collect puts it, ‘Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.’
The cross gives us a capacity to embrace suffering that no other religion offers. And we see this in the life of Peter. Remember, Peter was the disciple who hated the idea of a suffering Messiah. In Mark chapter 8 Jesus warns his disciples about the coming crucifixion, and Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him to his face.

And yet as Jesus suffers and dies, somehow Peter is completely changed. His worldview is transformed. Just as the Pharisee Paul came to see the beauty of grace—Peter, the apostle of comfort, came to see the glory of suffering. He was blind but then he saw. And we too can see—in the light of the cross—the perfect love that casts out fear.

Secondly, the resurrection. Again, verse 18: ‘Jesus was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.’ Later in verse 21 Peter notes that we are saved in baptism through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’

The resurrection gives us hope and meaning in the midst of suffering. Victor Frankl, the Jewish psychologist, who survived Auschwitz observed that it was those prisoners who found meaning and purpose in their suffering who survived. The truth is, our emotions are not determined by our circumstances. Instead, our emotions are shaped by that on which we set our hope.

Tim Keller has a great illustration of this. Imagine there’s a guy who’s told, ‘For the next year, you will have to work 16 hours a day in this small windowless room. And at the end of the year we’ll pay you twenty thousand dollars.’ For that guy, this would be absolute misery.

But take another guy and tell him, ‘You’ll have to work 16 hours a day in this small windowless room, and at the end of the year we’ll pay you twenty million dollars.’ Same circumstances, same workload—for one its misery, for another, it’s a walk in the park.

Our experience of suffering is shaped by what we’re hoping for. And in the resurrection we can see that these light and momentary afflictions are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us.

Say your body is broken. You can’t do the things you love to do anymore. The resurrection says, remember the new body you will have in the new creation. Think about how you will eat and drink and dance. And not for 70 years, but for 70 million years and more.

If you’ve lost a loved one, think about the reunion, the laughter, the hugs, and the eternity you will have together. Take all the joy you’ve had together in this life and multiply it by the grace of God.

If you’re poor and you’ve never traveled the world like you wanted, imagine having eternity to explore the new creation, where even the most mundane sights will make the beauty of this earth look like ashes.

Finally, say that you’re grieving the decline of America. The loss of so much virtue and faith. The resurrection tells us that anything that was ever good and true and beautiful about America, will never be truly lost. It will endure forever in the new creation.

And so in light of the resurrection we don’t have to be afraid of suffering, because, quite frankly, we have nothing to lose. As Jesus says in Luke 9, ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’

Finally, the ascension. Verse 22: ‘Jesus Christ has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.’ This echoes verse 19, where Jesus proclaims his triumph to the evil spirits in prison.

Basically, the ascension tells us that Jesus is king. Not Caesar, nor any power or principality. You know, in 47 BC Julius Caesar conquered Asia Minor with the famous words, Veni, Vidi, Vici. ‘I came, I saw, I conquered.’

But in the ascension Jesus Christ returns to His Father and says, ‘I died, I rose, I conquered.’ And not just a scrap of ground in Turkey, but the universe. The ascension tells us that Jesus is reigning, there will be cosmic justice. No one is going to get away with anything. And so we don’t have to prove ourselves. We don’t have to win. The ascension tells us the righteous will be vindicated in Christ.
And this is how people like Peter, people like Franz Jaggerstatter, like a million others over the centuries have endured suffering with hope and peace. Because they gave themselves wholly to God. And in that intimate relationship, their lives became hidden with Christ. And suffering couldn’t touch them in that place. As Jaggerstatter said, in his last words at the guillotine, ‘I am completely bound in inner union with the Lord.’

My friends, do you have that peace? Do you have that poise and confidence? Do you want it? If so, embrace the cross with your whole heart, embrace the resurrection and the ascension. Embrace Jesus, and you will find what you seek. Let’s pray.

Gracious Lord, thank you for your Word today, thank you for the witness of Peter and the martyrs. Help us by your Spirit, to embrace these great truths, that we may learn to suffer well, that we may live and die with grace and courage. That your kingdom would come through us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.