

1 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 in so far 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 throughout 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 for ever and ever. Amen.

God Most High, reigning in glory, send down your Spirit of wisdom to shine in your heavenly Word, so that we may worship you with joy continually blessing your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If you have been listening to or watching the service during the Easter season you will have noticed that the second reading has been from 1 Peter. 1 Peter was probably written around 90 CE, or 60 years after Jesus died. Chances are that it was not written by the apostle Peter, since he died sometime around 64-68 CE. Most scholars believe it may have been written by one of Peter's close followers.

One of the biggest themes from this letter is how Christians have to stand up to persecution. After all, when it was written the church was being persecuted by the Roman emperor Domitian. The fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius recounted a story that Domitian even interrogated Jesus' relatives as a way to extinguish the Christian movement. You see, as emperor, he liked to be addressed as *dominus et deus* (lord and god). As you can imagine, Christians were not willing to use that term for anyone but God, so they were considered traitors of the state and treated accordingly.

The point being that although there is much to be said for this letter, I tend to be wary about preaching about it. You see, contrary to what some people will tell you, Christianity is not currently being persecuted in this country. Let me repeat that for those who may have tuned out for a second, Christians are not being persecuted for their beliefs in this country!

I know some people will tell you that they are. Some will complain that they are forced to bake and decorate cakes for same sex marriages, some will complain when someone wishes them "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," and of course some will complain that the government is persecuting them because they cannot have in person services due to pandemic restrictions, but these are not persecutions.

Let me tell you what persecution looks like. I have two true stories to tell. Both are from members of my former congregation while I was going to seminary. Both are from refugees from Indonesia. My home church welcomed an Indonesian fellowship into our church. They would meet after our service for worship in Indonesian and have a fellowship time with a potluck afterwards. Genevieve volunteered to help teach the kids during their service.

The Indonesian pastor of this group was in the U.S. because of religious persecution. Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands and is predominantly Moslem. The major cities are

a little more cosmopolitan, but many areas are very radical. This man had a bomb explode near him when he was a child. He was lucky enough to survive with just some scarring and hearing loss in one ear. Before he was an official pastor, he was an evangelist, and a group of people attempted to drown him for his preaching. He was also lucky enough to receive asylum.

One of his parishioners also had a harrowing experience. I think I may have talked about this young man's story before. He was here in Minnesota seeking asylum. It can take years to get seen in court for an asylum case, plus then there are appeals. It is very important that asylum seekers keep the court updated about where they live, so that they can receive official documents and also so they can be kept track of.

This young man went to the government office and filed paperwork for an address change, but although the clerk stuck the change of address form in his physical file, they did not update the computer system. When the courts moved up his court date, they did not send him a notice. When he showed up at the original time, they arrested him. Before he could appeal the decision the U.S. deported him back to Indonesia, but not before someone who worked in the asylum courts put his name on a list of names of people trying to get religious persecution asylum and sent the list to Indonesian religious officials. He had to go into hiding for fear of his life because Moslem radicals were searching for people who were besmirching the countries policies.

Luckily for him, with help from the church, we were able to appeal his deportation and get him back for a proper trial and he was eventually granted asylum.

That is what persecution for your faith looks like, and we are not on the receiving end of it. Nobody is threatening us here because we are Presbyterian. None of us fear for our lives if we pray in public. We are not treated as second class citizens for our beliefs. In fact, if anything, despite our Constitution declaring the separation of church and state, Christianity, or at least parts of it, are interwoven into our civic lives.

So now that I've gotten that out of the way, I do want to talk about some of the things that we as non-persecuted Christians can still take away from this scripture. In fact, there are three things that I want to talk about.

The first thing is that despite what I've said about Christianity not being persecuted in the U.S., we are in this pandemic situation that is stressful and seems to be constraining. We are being restricted in activities, even though it is not because we are Christians. In this time, some of the base tenets of the faith seem to go against the grain of society. The ideas of self-sacrifice and love of our neighbors seems to have gone by the wayside.

During World War II the country was on rations. People sacrificed a lot of things like eating meat, sugar, nylon, rubber, and steel, just to name a few. I'm sure there was a black market, and I'm sure that not everyone was on board, but you don't hear much about that today. You hear about people willing to make sacrifices for the good of the country, and that lasted for over four years.

We are in the second to third month of stay at home orders and people are chomping at the bit to get back to "normal." People are worried about businesses closing, and they want to go have a meal out, visit with friends in person, and enjoy a movie or live entertainment, and some are out protesting that their "freedom" is being infringed upon. I get the frustration. I want all those things too. All of my continuing education classes have been basically cancelled, and I called in to cancel our vacation to the Wisconsin Dells this week because it is not going to be safe to go to a waterpark filled with people, even in August.

This virus situation is especially insidious because, as of this writing, we only have had four cases of covid-19 in the entire county. I go to stores and see most people without masks and I'm sure that it's because the masks are uncomfortable, and it seems like it's a waste of time, or people think that they aren't going to help (but they do. They especially protect others from a possibly infected you!).

We need to reframe the way we think about how we respond to this pandemic as Christians. As a post on Facebook said, "It's disappointing that the current discussion is 'How can we open businesses quickly so those businesses/employees can pay their bills?' rather than 'How can we help businesses/employees pay their bills until it's safe to reopen?'" We need to remember that loving our neighbor means caring enough to do what is needed to keep them safe, even if it means some inconvenience for ourselves. We need to do what is right rather than what is popular, or what may seem like the majority want.

The second thing we can take from today's scripture is that we need to submit to God and humble ourselves with the confidence that God cares. We see this in 1 Peter 5:6-7. There are "ministers" that claim that "God wants you to live your best life now," and to a point that is true. God however does not promise that our life will be easy or without sorrow or pain. In fact, Jesus has told us in the scriptures and shown us through his own death that is not the case. Bad things will happen. Sometimes they happen because of our choices, sometimes they happen because of other people's choices, and sometimes they just happen, and we don't know why they happen.

God may not stop the bad things from happening, but God is with us, sharing in our suffering and sorrow. 1 Peter 1:7 says that our faith is tested by fire, and in the Beatitudes, Jesus says blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake. But verse 14 also says, "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." God is asking us to be the embodiment of love to the world, and God knows it isn't easy, but God is with us, and as the poet and singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer says "You can do this hard thing."

The final thing that we need to take away from this passage is that we need to stay alert. "Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering." As I mentioned earlier, it is easy to become complacent. We cannot give up now.

As I mentioned in regard to this pandemic we are all suffering from fatigue, and it would be so easy to just let go of the restrictions, ignore the warnings and history, and start going back to business as usual. It only takes one slip for things to change drastically.

One of the early cases that we had in the county was an employee at the local grocery store. Luckily for us this person showed symptoms, self-quarantined, and recovered. Can you imagine what would have happened if they didn't feel sick and had continued to work at the store? This was just before a lot of the restrictions were enacted. Most of this town could have been infected. That's 1,800 people, not counting those in the country. It is quite probable that between actually going to the store, or having contact with someone who did, everyone in town could have been infected. Assuming, that approximately 2% of those who get the virus die, we could have had 30 or more deaths in town! Honestly, I think that's on the lower side considering the ages and health conditions of many in our community, and the fact that it would have overwhelmed the health system in the area. How many friends, relatives, and neighbors would we have lost?

We may not have to fear for our lives by professing our Christian faith, but it is easy enough to slip into apathy; we do need to be sure that we are practicing our faith. We need to show our love for our neighbors by being willing to sacrifice what some view as freedoms. We need to be willing to protect others by taking precautions and following the guidelines put forth by experts that know what they're talking about.

We need to recognize that life is good, yet life also can be filled with pain and sorrow. God is with us in either case. We need to give our burdens to God; God can carry them and support us.

Finally, we need to be constantly vigilant. Evil and complacency are just waiting for us to slip up and make a mistake. Let us work to show our faith and make this world a safer and better place. Amen.