

*Texts: 1 Peter 3:13-22, 19-25; Matthew 5, 3-10*

*Subject: Suffering for Doing Right*

*Theme: Hope to Share*

*Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 24, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I was at a gathering of clergy people around 2015, and a local Episcopal priest was sharing some thoughts about how we as Christians are to live in a world where so many are divided by politics, race, and economic status. As he reflected on the political debates happening around that time he couldn't help but be realistic, and said something that stuck with me. He said, "I think we're due for some suffering." It seemed like a hopeless thing to say to me at the time. I don't think he was longing for that, or predicting the future, or wishing that on anyone, but naming what he saw as a declining spirit of unity in our nation, that has become clear to most of us in the years since. And while his observation has come to pass in many ways, so many of us continue to serve, pray, gather, and build up the body - we show up - despite the troubles we face every day. How does that happen? Surrounded by suffering and danger, how do we live?

This seems to be the question Peter is getting at in this third chapter of his letter. We'll remember that the communities that received this letter were ones that would have included Jewish and non-jewish citizens, maybe foreigners, artisans or merchants, some more privileged than others, and some whose very lives were at risk because of their confessions of faith. Christianity was not the mainstream, and these first churches were still trying to figure out how to survive, and how to interact with the world around them. This letter is a word of encouragement, but also a warning to those who would be

tempted to either hide or deny their faith, or to lash out at those who would punish them for their beliefs.

Maybe it seems hard for us to relate to the kind of suffering they would have faced, but it's not hard to imagine what life is like for our neighbors who come from another place, who worship in ways different from our own, or who hold contrasting beliefs. Across the street from this church, is the building that has historically been a home to Baptists - starting as the First Victory Baptist church in Las Vegas. About ten years ago it was Pathways church. Soon after, the building was purchased by a large congregation in Summerlin, who then launched The Hills Downtown, which closed during 2020. It now is the home of a Buddhist community, who you may have noticed has planted trees around the property, and fenced it in. They have been very welcoming and we have connected on occasion here in the neighborhood. But some in the community have viewed these new neighbors with suspicion. And, it's a little confusing, I'm sure, as they still have crosses on the building, but I expect that will change in time. But they dress differently, they might seem like outsiders around here. To be a part of a faith tradition that is outside of the American mainstream can be difficult. We have heard reports of vandalism, discrimination, and even violence just because someone is of another faith, another culture, or another race.

When was it difficult for you to be a Christian? What makes it hard for you to follow Jesus? *Take a minute and talk to someone next to you about a time when you found it difficult to have faith or to be a part of the church - online family, you can share in the comments.*

Maybe it's when we face particular hardships and we find that God is not responding to our prayers in the way we would desire. Or when we lose someone we love, and find out that life is not fair. Or when terrible things happen in the world and we wonder how God could allow such suffering. I can't think of a time when people around me made it dangerous to share my beliefs in God. It was rarely the cool thing to do. Maybe people would think I was weird! It might feel awkward at times to share our faith, and I do find it painful that ALL Christians get grouped in with the ones who hurt others or set a bad example in the world. But, I've never had to fear for my life because of my faith tradition. Others know this reality far better than I do.

Even if we don't know that kind of persecution, we can still be encouraged by this letter, and to learn how to live in dangerous times. We can hear this call to not hide from the world around us but "to give a reason for the hope that is in us" - to share how it is that we can continue to grow and thrive and believe when the pain of the world reaches our doorstep. People want to know, "Why do you continue to go to church when so many have drifted away?" "Why do you continue to believe in God when there is so much death and violence in the world?" "How can you stand to be associated with those people who judge others, who hate their neighbors, who hurt people, and then name themselves as Christians?"

Maybe these are hard questions to answer for you. They are worth considering. and we should take the time to get to the heart of what it is we believe and how it forms us for life in the world.

We pray that our lives would show God's goodness in the world. Sometimes they do. Where we know God, where we see Christ most fully is where God has *chosen to*

*be reveled* to us - in the cross. In Christ's suffering, we see what it really means to be a follower of this suffering servant. It's here that we learn that, despite the pain of the world, and the terrible destruction that we cause and that we experience in the creation, and the failures we live with, that we are loved, transformed, resurrected and re-created with our Lord and Savior. Our troubles and all our suffering, along with our moments of joy and delight, are a part of the life we have been given, as a gift from God. Each moment is a blessing, even when we cannot see it, and we don't have to know all the reasons why everything happens to us, or compare our lives to the world around us. We are blessed to know that we are different, we are given the gift of God's grace, forgiveness, and eternal life in our baptism.

Peter reminds the hearers of the story of Noah and the ark. Noah is one called out from his community, mocked and persecuted for following God's direction in his life, when others around him must have thought he stupid, a loser, or insane. He trusted God and because of this, was saved from the flood, along with his family. YOU have already been saved from death and sin, and the evil of the world. We are filled with the promise of new life in Christ, as we are the ones who have risen up from the waters of baptism and marked with the sign on the cross - that is Christ's suffering - welcomed into the family of the saints of God, and sent into the world.

William Barclay writes that "a saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God." Saints might be the ones we think of like Mary Magdalene, known as the apostle to the apostles, who was the first to proclaim Christ risen from the dead, or those famous saints through history like Saint Francis or St. Jude. But they are also the ones who have given us the reason for the hope that is in them, the ones who

demonstrated to us what a life of faith can and ought to look like. They were ones who invited us to Bible study, who sang “Jesus Loves Me - this I know” to us as children, who welcomed us back after we had fallen away, who sat with us in our grief, who showed up to help in our times of need. They were the ones who helped us not to lose hope. They shared it with grace and humility, not to brag or boast, but to share their own story for the sake of building up the body of Christ.

This is the encouragement we need, and a path to living in dangerous times, a recipe for *sharing the heart of Christ in the heart of the city*. We are to give a defense, a reason, an explanation for the hope that is us: through words and actions, with reverence, humility, and with joy, as we are empowered through the Holy Spirit, at every opportunity, that others may know they are not alone, and that they too belong to God, even when suffering comes.

One interpreter writes that “Our faith must be a first-hand discovery, rather than a second hand story.” I have shared in this place about my own faith and experiences, and my favorite seminary professors and Sunday school teachers, my grandmother, and church members who have been a part of my faith journey. You have your own stories. Maybe you’ve heard that faith is *caught*, more than it is *taught*. So it is powerful when we get to invite others into the life of faith, often by asking them to come to church with us, but also by enticing them to serve with us, to rejoice and celebrate with us, and it’s okay if they start by thinking we’re a little weird. We are. Name it. Embrace it. Enjoy it. The promise from Jesus is that all who have suffered in this life, the outsiders, the losers, the listeners, the humble and hurting, the powerless and the peacemakers all belong in the kingdom, and in fact will be the ones who see the Lord.

We have hope to share with the world around us. And our hope is not in the things that this world cares about most - not in success or power, or money or status, but in the one who has already suffered and died for us, and for the God of grace who persists in welcoming us back into the fold, who speaks to us and send us from here to love and to be of service to our neighbors, no matter what they say or do to us. We proclaim Christ crucified and risen, the hope that is in us, today and always.

Amen.