

**May 24, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Easter 7
I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**

Sometimes things just jump right out at preachers and scream, “Preach me! Preach me!” That happened to me as I looked over the readings for today. The epistle from I Peter took me by the lapels, looked me in the eye, and said, “Phil, if you don’t see the relevance in my message for what your world is going through right now you should just send your ordination papers right back to your bishop!”

First, though, a disclaimer: Yes, I know that today is a special Sunday in our church year. It is Ascension, the story of Jesus being taken up into the sky after promising the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to take his place. Yes, I know that the first reading and the gospel tell the story of the Ascension. Yes, I know we omitted the gospel today. Yes, I know that it is Memorial Day. But I am not preaching on any of that. Why? Because I Peter wouldn’t let me.

I mean, with what we all have been experiencing with a world-wide pandemic which has killed and sickened millions worldwide, forced hordes into unemployment, many into bankruptcy, and too many into hunger and famine ... in a time when we go around avoiding one another and living in fear that someone else’s microscopic infected little droplet will find its way through our masks and down into our lungs ... in a time when even common suffering has become politicized... how could I help but be drawn to these words from I Peter:

“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.” Fiery ordeal? Something strange happening to us? How could we not read those words and think of the novel coronavirus, Covid 19?! In this time of angst and fear, how could we not be drawn to Peter’s encouragement to “Cast your anxiety on (God) because he cares for you.”? How could we not be willing to take Peter’s advice to, “Discipline

yourselves” and “keep alert.”? And, finally, how could we not wrap ourselves in the comfort of the final verse. Here it is. Warm yourself with its hope for a vaccine: “And, after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace ... will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

So there and well! We could put a period on it and end this sermon right there. Be bold. Be strong. For the Lord our God is with you! Amen. Go in peace!

But wait ... there's more! There always is!

I Peter wasn't written 2,000 years ago prophesying a twenty-first century pandemic. But, as one person has said, “History may not repeat itself. But, at times, it sure rhymes.” 1st century Christians suffered. We are suffering. It rhymes. But I Peter was written to encourage a community of first century Christians who were experiencing *true* suffering. True suffering. As in, “Let's kill the Christians. They're different than we are!” Torture and death are a bit different than not being able to eat at your favorite restaurant or not being able to find toilet tissue at the market.

Putting the humor aside, though, there is a rhyme. Those who contract our virus become very sick. They do suffer. The death total is now well over 100,000. What Peter (or whoever wrote this epistle) was saying to *his* community was, “God did not cause this suffering. You are not being punished. But God goes with you through this and you can come out stronger in the end. God's grace always goes with you.”

But, there's an overtone to all of this. The first century Christian community wasn't being persecuted for what it *believed*, but for what it did. It didn't matter particularly that Christians worshiped Jesus while others around the Mediterranean worshipped the Greek and Roman Gods. That wasn't it. It was because the Christian community didn't conform to the social order. They didn't conform to a hierarchy or a class system. All things were held in common. If you made money it was put into the communal pot. If you needed something, it was

taken from the communal pot. They fed hungry people. They clothed naked people. They brought homeless people inside. Furthermore, they welcomed the stranger. *Who does that?!* They went about preaching good news to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, sight for the blind, and liberation for the oppressed. This simply was not part of the culture in which they lived. The power structures of the day did not make room for this. Such counter-cultural behavior was not approved of.

And so the power structure of the day did to them what we often do to those who break the norms. They kept them out, pushed them down, and did to them what had been done to Jesus. Imprisonment. Mockery. Torture. And, in many cases, death.

So, when we read I Peter's encouragement to a suffering people, we can read it as giving hope to us in this time of a worldwide pandemic and the inconveniences we are experiencing now. But maybe there is a more radical overtone to all this. Maybe we aren't suffering enough. I guess I'd better go back and repeat that. Maybe we aren't suffering enough. No, I don't mean Coronavirus. I think we're suffering quite enough with it and I hope it goes away and the sooner the better.

What I mean is this: Maybe we need to be counter-cultural, like the first century church. Maybe we need to stand against the "way things are done." Maybe we need to stand up to racism, sexism, nationalism, exclusivism, and homophobia. It is simply amazing how quickly we, as a nation, have come to normalize all the things Jesus was against. Jesus was against division, lying, greed, selfishness, fear of people who are not like we are.

When we put others first and wear masks – not to protect ourselves, but to protect our neighbor – we are being countercultural.

Last week our Zoom speaker, Roxanne Edwards, told us a countercultural story. Roxanne is a transgender woman in a longtime loving and monogamous relationship with her wife. She told of visiting a large church in our area. This is a

church which had a welcome statement like ours. It said it accepts *all* people of all races and all sexual orientations. The pastor, too, was very friendly and welcoming ... that is until she confided to him that she used to be a man and now was a woman and was married to a woman. The pastor was still friendly ... that is until she volunteered to teach a youth group. Then it came out that only people in “traditional” marriages were allowed to do that. Furthermore, while she was “welcome,” she would need change her gender identity and her marital status back to something more “normal.”

Roxanne suffered for who she was and how she behaved. The culture rejected her. That church was a “cultural” church. She eventually became a member of a counter-cultural church. When churches are counter-cultural they stand to suffer. They may be criticized. They may lose members.

So, maybe if we aren’t suffering we aren’t doing it right. Just something to think about.

Let’s go home with a word of hope. Whether our minds are on the pandemic or whether our minds are on justice issues, let’s be comforted by Peter’s words of promise: “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.”

Let his final words be the benediction to this sermon: “To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”