**Sermon 10/27/19**

**1ST Peter 1:22-25, 2:1-10, & 3:8-12**

Carl was getting up in years, he had recently celebrated his 87 birthday.

He had lived in the neighborhood for over 50 years.

He would always greet his neighbors with a big smile and a firm handshake.

But he was quiet and didn't talk much.

No one could really say they knew him very well.

Before his retirement, he took the bus to work each morning.

The sight of him walking down the street alone often worried the neighbors.

He had a slight limp from a bullet wound received in World War II.

Although he had survived the war, his neighbors worried that

          he may not make it through the changing neighborhood

          with its ever-increasing random violence, gangs, and drug activity.

When Carl saw the flier at his church asking for volunteers

          to help care for the community gardens behind the minister's residence,

          he responded in his characteristically unassuming manner.

Without fanfare, he simply signed up.

One hot afternoon, he was just finishing his watering of the garden for the day

          when three gang members approached him.

Ignoring their attempt to intimidate him, he simply said,

          “It's a hot day, would you like a drink from the hose?”

The tallest and toughest looking of the three said,

          "Yeah, sure," with a nasty little smile.

As Carl offered the hose to him, the other two grabbed Carl's arms

          and threw him down on the ground.

The hose snaked crazily over the ground, dousing everything in its way.

Carl's assailants stole his retirement watch and his wallet, and then fled.

Carl tried to get himself up, but he had landed on his bad leg.

He lay there trying to gather himself as the minister came running to help him.

He had witnessed the attack from his window,

          but he couldn't get there fast enough to stop it.

“Carl, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

          the minister kept asking as he helped Carl to his feet.

Carl wiped the water from his face and sighed, shaking his head.

          “Just some punk kids. I hope they'll wise up someday.”

His wet clothes clung to his slight frame as he bent to pick up the hose.

He adjusted the nozzle again and started to water.

Confused and a little concerned, the minister asked, "Carl, what are you doing?"

"I've got to finish my watering. It's been very dry lately," came the calm reply.

The minister remained with Carl until he was finished tending the gardens.

A few weeks later the three trouble makers returned.

Just as before, their threat was unchallenged.

Carl again offered them a drink from his hose.

This time they didn't rob him, after all, he didn't really have anything they wanted.

They wrenched the hose from his hand,

          and drenched him head to foot in the icy water.

When they finished humiliating him, they sauntered off down the street,

          falling over one another laughing at what they had done.

Carl silently watched them walk away.

Then he picked up the hose, and standing in the warmth of the sun,

          he finished watering the garden.

The summer was quickly fading into fall.

Carl was doing some clean-up before winter arrived,

          when he was startled by the sudden approach of someone behind him.

He stumbled and fell into some evergreen branches.

As he struggled to regain his footing, he turned to see

          the tall leader of his summer tormentors reaching down for him.

He braced himself for the expected attack.

“Don't worry old man, I'm not gonna hurt you this time.”

The young man spoke softly, offering his tattooed and scarred hand to Carl.

As he helped Carl get up, the man pulled a crumpled bag from his pocket

          and handed it to Carl.

"What's this?" Carl asked.

“It's your stuff back," the man explained, "even the money in your wallet.”

Confused, Carl simply asked, "Why?"

The man shifted his feet, seeming embarrassed and ill at ease.

"I learned something from you," he said.

     "I ran with that gang and hurt people like you.

     We picked you because you were old and we knew we could do it.

    But every time we came and did something to you,

     instead of yelling and fighting back, you tried to give us a drink.

     You didn't hate us for hating you. You kept showing love against our hate."

He stood silent for a few moments, and then said:

     “I couldn't sleep after we stole your stuff, so here it is back.”

He paused for another awkward moment, not knowing what more there was to say.

"That bag with your stuff is my way of saying thanks for straightening me out,

     I guess." And then he turned and walked off down the street.

Carl looked down at the sack in his hands and gingerly opened it.

He took out his retirement watch and put it back on his wrist.

Opening his wallet, he checked for his wedding photo.

He gazed for a moment at the young bride who still smiled back at him

          from all those years ago.

Carl died one cold day after Christmas that winter.

Many people attended his funeral in spite of the weather.

In particular the minister noticed a tall young man he didn't know,

            sitting quietly in the back, wearing a thin chain with a cross.

How do we respond to persecution?

Peter wrote this letter to those who were suffering

            and facing persecution because of their faith.

How should we act, what should we do when trouble comes?

The apostle Peter took up that challenge just as ominous rumblings

           from Rome were striking fear in every Christian community. Half-crazed

Nero had seized on believers as scapegoats for the problems of his empire.

Should the persecuted Christians flee or resist?

Should they tone down their outward signs of faith?

Should they just give up?

Peter's readers, their lives in danger, needed clear advice on suffering.

Why does God allow it?         Does God care?

Peter taught that suffering should not catch a Christian off guard.

We live in a hostile world, and where Christians thrive, storm clouds often gather.

On the subject of suffering, Peter makes an ideal counselor for his readers,

He had been flogged and imprisoned for his own faith,

          once even expecting execution.

Peter had personally watched Jesus endure suffering,

          and in this letter he points to him as an example of how to respond.

"Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which is taking place among you.

Have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart."

He gave a deep insights into what it meant for Christ to suffer on our behalf.

“Suffering is temporary, to be endured only for a little while."

Skeptics have criticized the church for stressing a future life.

"You promise pie in the sky by and by," they taunt.

But to Peter's readers, wary of enemies on the prowl, unsure of surviving

          another day, that message was as tangible and nourishing as food.

Our hope that suffering will one day cease, is not a mirage,

          but a living hope in the One who has conquered death.

At first Christianity enjoyed official toleration by the Roman empire,

          but gradually the government turned against it.

Rome resented the Christians' objections to idolatry and decadence

and their talk about another kingdom.

Although 1 Peter was originally written to people in severe danger, its lessons

          apply to all of us, for we all experience pain and suffering of some kind.

Why don't things work out the way we want?

What is God trying to teach us?

How does God want us to live?

Peter's words of comfort and assurance strengthened those of his time

          and still encourage us today:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,

          God's special possession,

so you may declare the praises of him

           who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

You are the people of God, you have received mercy.

Be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

Repay evil with blessing. Turn from evil and do good.

Because of who we are, we can show others who God is.

As long as humans continue to sin, suffering will be part of our lives.

A distant, swirling cloud of dust signaled the approach of Turkish death squads.

But who could escape?

The villages of Armenia sat exposed and defenseless on a rocky plain.

Doomed Christians clung together on the floors of their homes,

           praying, singing, and shivering with fear.

This scene was repeated often during World War I,

          and it usually ended in a massacre.

The Turkish assault against Armenian Christians

           was one of history's worst religion-inspired bloodbaths:

Over one million people died.

But, sadly, the Armenian tragedy was but one of the many attacks against

          20th century Christians.

More people have died for their religious faith in the last century

          than in all the rest of history combined.

Thousands of Christians died in East Africa,

          first in the Mau Mau uprising,

          and then during Ugandan dictator Idi Amin's reign of terror.

Millions more suffered under soviet and Chinese governments.

The oppression continues.

Even today some countries imprison and torture Christians.

But we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, God's special possession,

          so we can continue to share the good news of God's love and forgiveness.

We can continue to love one another, to be compassionate and humble,

           even to those who hurt us.

As God's people have done throughout the centuries,

         we can make a difference in the world, by living God's way.

Because of who we are, we can show others who God is.         **AMEN**