

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas: January 5, 2019**  
**“Often Disappointed, But Never Surprised”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text this morning is our Epistle reading, 1 Peter 4.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution asserts, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” For many, this is interpreted as an idea that their religion ought to be insulated from the attack of others. Some would call this the American Dream. It was a dream of a nation, which had the freedom of religion. It was thought to be a place where you could be any religion you wanted and practice any faith freely, and no one could or would do anything about it.

That is what it is—a dream. It has never fully panned out to perfect completion. In this melting pot of American dreamy crass argumentation there are, sadly, many who use this so-called freedom to destroy that freedom for others. The right to practice whatever religion you wish is a goal, but it is not one we are likely to actually achieve, because some people use that liberty as a tool to attack others and to undermine our liberties.

The Holy Spirit reminds us, “*we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*”<sup>1</sup>

This adds to the depth of our understanding the real problem. The devil does not want us to practice our faith freely. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh are constantly working against us, and Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*”<sup>2</sup>

What does this mean? There are no surprises, or as a wise pastor once told me, “Often disappointed, but never surprised.” If we believe what we say we believe about sin, there is nothing about our depravity, or that of the world, or the barrage of the devil that should surprise us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 6:12

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:10-11

Jesus promised that if we faithfully followed Him, the world would hate us and we would be persecuted. World history has demonstrated the accuracy of that statement. Christians in every age, and in every corner of the world have been hated and persecuted for their faith. Even here, in America, it is considered narrow-minded and rude, not to mention hopelessly backward, to stand firmly on one's faith and not go along with the socially approved ecumenical spirit of our times.

According to our culture, and many Scripture twisters, anything and everything is Christian. The Bible is constantly being retranslated, and mistranslated, and pieces left out, and anything is ok, and God is a loose, free-loving, hipster God with no more substance than a wet napkin. The only thing that seems to not be permissible is standing firm on the faith once delivered to the saints, and refusing to recognize the validity and worth of the random thoughts of others on the topic of religion. If you stand firm in the true Christian faith you are ridiculed, mocked, verbally assaulted, and more and more the verbal assaults are becoming physical; not just in other countries, but here, in the United States.

Listen again to Peter's words, "***Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.***"<sup>3</sup> The earliest Christians suffered persecution, and they were people just like you. They, too, had thought that if they were God's chosen and favorites, that life ought to be good, and the pains and troubles of life ought to flee from them, and blessings should be the order of the day. That is how the human mind works - patronage and favoritism and that sort of thing, which we see so commonly in politics. After all, what good is position and favor if it doesn't work out to your benefit? What is the point of scratching someone's back, if yours still itches?

Peter is writing to Christians, where things didn't work out the way they thought that they should. They had persecution, and poverty, and terrible suffering. They could not make sense of it. Peter reminds them that being the child of God in the devil's kingdom was not going to be easy, or necessarily fun at times.

It might go without saying, but our nation has a different way of persecuting the truth, and those who are faithful to God by holding to the truth of His Word. Many

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 4:12

in the U.S. don't face physical violence, so much as we face ridicule and disapproval and dismissal, and the sort of attack that says that you should not be so narrow-minded and you should not hold yourself and your religion up as something special. We face the disdain of others, and the dismissal of our values and our confidence and our truths. Do any of these ring close to home? “Everyone knows that you cannot be right and all those others wrong. Everyone knows that to hold too tightly to your truths and your values is radical, and fundamentalistic, and terroristic and, well, just wrong”?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we live in a time and a culture prepared to embrace a deliberate and well and publicly identified lie as true, but if you stand on your religion as true and theirs as in error, well, that is construed as judgmental and discriminatory and unacceptable - and can be legally actionable.

Our persecution is peer pressure, which we are all trained to be sensitive and constantly on guard. We all hate pain, and I'm not the only one who naturally tends to bend away from suffering. When it comes to suffering on account of your faith, you may be disappointed, but should not be surprised. In fact, you should expect it.

That doesn't mean that you will enjoy it. Pain hurts. Sorrow is sad. Ridicule is difficult to bear. The unexpected attack can be hard to handle, and when it happens, we are to learn to say, “Ahhh! Here it is. I knew this was coming.”

There are things you can do, of course, to make people attack you. You do bad things, and that is why Peter writes, “***Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.***”<sup>4</sup> Because the sinful nature still clings to you this side of the resurrection, Christians are not always above crimes, or bad behavior. They should be, but they are not. There is no glory and no benefit in suffering that you bring on yourself by evil conduct or stupidity; however, if you are hated, spoken evil of, attacked, or dealt with poorly on account of being a Christian or making a faithful and clear confession, there is no shame in that, only glory, glory to God in the highest!

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 4:15–16

There were times in the history of the church where people deliberately sought out pain and trouble, believing it was a mark of blessing and a good thing to be a Christian who suffers. The monks in the monasteries would deny themselves, beat themselves, torture themselves, believing it was a holy thing to do. That was wrong. It is not a good thing to suffer. Suffering is only a good thing if the suffering is occasioned by your clear and faithful identification with Christ and with the Gospel. Early in the history of the church, some believers would attack Roman Soldiers in order to be martyred. They were thinking that suffering and death as a Christian was blessed - without any notice of its cause. Peter says, don't let it happen to you on account of your bad behavior. It is only filled with glory if it comes as an attack on Christ in you.

You don't have to go looking for it, it will come to you soon enough. If you stand firm in your faith, if you confess Christ, it comes swift and fierce. Family members will tell you to get off your high horse. Friends will tell you to keep you religion to yourself - and may even distance themselves from you if you don't. Employers may tell you that your faith - and its symbols - are not welcome around the workplace. People will find things to criticize and nit-pick on you because you are supposed to be something special, better, without any flaws, real or imagined. Perhaps bigger things will happen among us as persecution in time - we cannot tell. One thing we do know, our faith is not welcome out in the world, and not really even among others who simply and only call themselves "Christian."

When this sort of thing happens, not if, but when, even though it hurts and irritates, count yourself blessed. First, it means that someone can see that you are really a Christian. That is a good thing.

Second, imagine how it will be for those who do not believe, when they face the wrath of God, if being a faithful child of God, and one of His favorite people, can be so irritating and painful. Again, Peter's words, "***For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And 'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'***"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 4:17-18

How disquieting and uncomfortable it will be to have never stood up for Christ, and have never confessed Him. If this suffering in this present age is part of heaven, what must the agony of hell be?

All the more beautiful to hear, “*Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*”<sup>6</sup> The answer in any suffering is God. Through His Word and Sacraments, He is here for you. He has promised to keep you and not permit you to have to endure more than you are able. So you do what is right. You do what God lays before you to do. He has laid out the works, and you simply walk in them.

How can you do that? Only in the grace of God. You keep the love of God for you before your eyes. You do it by constant prayer, faithful attention to His Word, regular participation in the fellowship of the saints, by eating and drinking of this holy meal, set before you for your forgiveness and strengthening.

This is why we gather; we need the constant reminder that Jesus died for you, and your sins have been forgiven. We remember as life becomes difficult, particularly when it becomes difficult on account of your faith, that **God loves you**, and nothing is for nothing. God will bless you for your troubles, and He will return the pain and difficulty given to you upon the heads of those who cause such trouble. They may not be able to connect the dots right away, but their troubles are part and parcel of the troubles they cause the children of God, and if we suffer as God's elect, what will it be for them on that great and terrible day?

So, let us be clear. When your faith and your confession brings ridicule or any other pain on you from the world around you, do not be surprised. It is likely to happen, and Jesus predicted it. Don't do anything to bring it on yourself. It will find you of its own accord. Remember that this is part of the plan of God, and remember that they will ultimately bear the fruits of their evil, unless they repent. Your patience in suffering may just be the witness to the Gospel that they need to come to the knowledge of the truth, “*there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.*”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 4:19

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 2:5–6

Remembering the pain of ridicule and persecution, we should be eager to spare our attackers the pains they are bringing on themselves by bringing them the good news of Christ and forgiveness.

While you are often disappointed, may you be never surprised. Let us pray:

“Through long grief-darkened days help us, dear Lord,  
To trust Your grace for courage to endure,  
To rest our souls in Your supporting love,  
And find our hope within Your mercy sure.”<sup>8</sup> Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of the Church: Second Sunday after Christmas: 5 January 2020**

Let us pray to the Lord on behalf of His Church, our nation, the causes of peace and justice, the needs of the sick, and all people according to their needs. O Lord, to Solomon You granted

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<sup>8</sup> When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love LSB 764:5

wisdom and a discerning mind. Give to Your people such wisdom from Your Word and a mind to discern truth from error, that we may know Jesus Christ and not depart from Him amid the winds of change and doubt that challenge our faith. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, You have blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places and cleansed us, that we might be holy and blameless in Christ. Give us conviction and courage, that we may live out faithfully this baptismal grace and be led by Your Holy Spirit to love You above all and to serve You with all that we are and all that we have. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, You have made known to us the mystery of Your saving will and purpose in Christ, our Savior. Grant to us faithful pastors who will preach faithfully this Gospel and administer to us in His name the Holy Sacraments. Give to us willing ears to hear and hearts to heed the teaching of Your Word, and through it raise up those who will serve us as pastors and church workers in all the days to come. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, You set apart kings and governments to safeguard Your people. Bless, we pray, our president; the Congress; our governor; our legislature; and all those who make, administer and judge our laws. Make them wise, and give them a discerning heart in the pursuit of justice for the offender, peace between the nations, and protection for the unborn and those least able to defend themselves. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, Your own Son was incarnate for us and grew from childhood into maturity filled with wisdom, and Your favor was upon Him. Grant to parents and the children in their care the wisdom and courage to know You as Savior and Redeemer and to gather at Your bidding around Your Word and table. Help us to form within our children the knowledge of and the will to do all that is right and good according to Your Word. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, our times are in Your hands. Look with favor, we pray, on Your servants *Alka and Millie* whom You have granted another year of earthly life. Grant that *they* may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen *their* trust in Your goodness all the days of *their* life; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, though the numbers of people are great, You know their needs and show Your mercy to each one. Give healing to the sick, strength to the weak, mercy to the shut-in, peace to the troubled, consolation to the grieving and comfort to the dying, [*especially Larry, Zoey, Susan, Carmen, and those we name in our hearts,*] that all who cry to You in need may be encouraged by Your presence through their trials and Your promise to grant the ultimate healing of eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, as blessed Mary treasured all things in her heart, grant us to know what is worthy of our attention and what will pass away, that approaching the table of our Lord we may be well-prepared to receive with repentance and faith His flesh for the life of the world and His blood that cleanses us from all our sin. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

All these things we pray, O Lord, in confidence of Your mercy, trusting that You will grant to us all things needful and prevent all things harmful to our faith, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**