

**In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen**

**Second Sunday after Christmas (2021)**

**Christian Suffering is Forged in the Suffering of Christ**

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***“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. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12–13, ESV)***

Many people this morning, are giving thanks that 2020 is over. Need anyone say that the past year was a year of turmoil and suffering? I think not. Not just our nation, but the entire world suffered through the pandemic of 2020, a pandemic that caused pain, suffering, and death to millions. Moreover, many are asking the question, why? Why God did You allow this suffering to be visited upon the world? But St. Peter says to us in our text today, ***“Do not be surprised . . . as though something strange were happening to you.” (v. 12)***

The Gospel Reading for today revealed the horrible situation in Bethlehem when Herod sent his murders into the city to kill every male child two-years old and younger, while trying to destroy the One who was prophesied to become king of Israel. Throughout the city, the loud voices of crying and grieving mothers rang out, “Why? Why God was the life of my son required?” And we ask, “how could God have allowed such a tragedy to happen?” But again, we’re reminded of the words of St. Peter, ***“Do not be surprised . . . as though something strange were happening to you.” (v. 12)***

St. Peter was a man familiar with suffering, with pain, and with persecution. In fact, he is writing this first letter to Christians who are in the midst of suffering, who are confused and discouraged because of the persecution they are encountering at the hands of Roman authorities. Surrounded by pagans of every stripe, these Christian readers of St. Peter’s letter face persecution and suffering every day. Based on Nero’s false accusation that the Christians were responsible for the burning of Rome, Christians were routinely hunted down and put into prison cells to await execution either by crucifixion or in the arena to be slaughtered by gladiators or by wild beasts. Such was the sport of Rome in those days.

The writer to the Hebrews gives us a vivid picture of the suffering St. Peter speaks of when he writes of the suffering of those who waited on the Messiah. He says, ***“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” (Hebrews 11:35–40, ESV)*** These people of faith bore witness to God more clearly through their suffering than through their achievements. The writer records their heroic deeds. Some were tortured, others were mocked, flogged, and executed in brutal ways, but ***“through their faith,”*** in God’s faithfulness, these old covenant people were vindicated by God. In life and death, prosperity and adversity, victory and

persecution, God vindicated them because of their faith, delivering them from sin, death, and the devil through His promise of a Savior.

But people like to complain when they encounter suffering, trial, and tribulation. It is a normal reaction. Man hopes to live a life free from suffering and pain and when it comes, he needs to blame someone because obviously it is not his fault. He is a victim, an innocent bystander who has been unfairly runover by the latest tragedy. There is an entire industry which relies on this victimhood mentality. It is comprised of professional politicians and religious hucksters who preach a victimhood message from their pulpits. Sometimes they are one and the same. In fact, if it were not for victims, they would have no reason for existing. Thus, they must make victims. They must invent suffering in order to convince the people they are their only hope. Vast fortunes are made from this industry of victimhood. But this is not the suffering St. Peter is speaking of in our text. St. Peter is speaking of suffering as a follower of Christ, one who not only experiences the suffering the world experiences, but one who suffers specifically because they are Christian. He speaks of those who are persecuted for their faith.

In our country we usually attribute this to Christians living in foreign lands, especially lands dominated by anti-Christian governments. Time and again we hear or read of accounts in those lands where Christians are persecuted because they confess Christ as Lord. Families are torn apart, houses of worship are torn down or burned to the ground, Christians are jailed, even murdered at the hands of fanatics or the government itself. In every case these brothers and sisters in Christ are persecuted for one reason, to silence the Word of the Gospel. That very word which would bring peace to their countries, is silenced by the most unpeaceful means. Satan is quite satisfied with his work in these countries.

In our country we think something like this could never happen. Our Constitution protects our right to worship, unhindered by government intervention. But this past year saw that guaranteed protection routinely violated by state and local governments. Christians were not only denied the right to assemble and worship on the Lord's Day, but when they did, they were persecuted, fined, threatened with imprisonment, and generally shamed by the Media. But why, as St. Peter asks, should this surprise us. Political persecution against the Church of God is not new. Satan has used God's means of controlling chaos as a tool to create chaos and mayhem for as long as there has been civilization.

So, in our text this morning, when St. Peter says, ***“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”*** (v. 12) his words cover a wide range of fiery trials, some though which do not seem so fiery when we first experience them, but they are aflame none-the-less with anti-Christian sentiment.

It is easy to recognize overt persecution; that is, imprisonment, torture, loss of home, or death as a fiery trial against someone because of their Christian faith. But how about the more subtle forms of persecution which Christians experience every day? In fact, St. Peter is telling his audience that they must set aside the notion that their suffering is exceptional. To the contrary, it is perfectly normal for Christians to suffer abuse, ridicule, and hatred. It is a necessary part of being a Christian, because first and foremost, the Christian is a cross-bearer.

Think of the times when you are at work or in school or in mixed company and someone ridiculed the Word of God by promoting sin. Oh, abortion, that's ok, the supreme court said so. Oh, living together outside of marriage? That's ok, society says so and so does my faith leader. Safe sex, that's ok according to the teacher. Oh, slandering your neighbor, ridiculing them, doxing them, belittling them, that's ok, everybody does it, especially ridiculing those who insist on obeying God rather than men while seeking to attend Divine Service even when their bishops

have closed their worship facilities. What kind of fool would put their god above men they ask? So when you stand up and say no, those things are not ok, the world ridicules you and calls you narrow minded. When you take a bold stand for Christ, you suffer for your faithfulness. Suddenly, you're alone in the crowd, ostracized, shamed, shunned, and belittled. When you stand for Christ, do not be surprised if those whom you thought were your friends, suddenly turn on you and cast you aside. Satan loves the lonely Christian. He salivates in your loneliness, hoping this feeling will lead to the loss of your faith. But again, St. Peter reminds you, ***“Do not be surprised . . . as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”*** (vv. 12-13)

In his letter, St. Peter addresses his readers as ***“Beloved,”*** reminding them that they are children of God, loved by Him with an everlasting love in Christ. In our modern society, people tend to drift apart. Finding themselves in a large crowd, they often feel alone and isolated. But no, one who is a child of God who finds themselves in a strange or hostile crowd, should never think of themselves as alone or unloved in this world. Faith reinforces their trust in God’s love even in the midst of fiery trials and sufferings.

Trials, sufferings, and persecution are the tools of evil, but we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, ***“deliver us from evil.”*** Thus, Dr. Luther reminds us, *“we pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputations, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.”*

When trails, sufferings, and persecution come our way, we remember that we are not the first to whom such sufferings came. God, Himself, suffered with us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. He suffered and died upon the Altar of the Cross for the curse which was ours and rose again victorious. It is in Him that we have the victory over sin, death, and the devil. Through His suffering, death, and resurrection we know that whatever evil befalls us, they will be overcome in Christ and we shall see God face-to face on the Last Day.

You were welcomed to Divine Service this morning with the words of the Invocation: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” thereby placing God’s name upon you, reminding you that in your baptism God joined Himself to you by becoming your heavenly Father, making you an heir of eternity with His Son, Jesus Christ. This same truth rings out in the words of the ancient church canticle, the Benedictus where we sing, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.”* He has sent His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ into this world to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil, saving us from the fiery trials and tribulations of hell. He has, *“delivered [us] from the hand of our enemies, [that we] might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.”* Serving Him without fear is serving Him by, ***“not [being] surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon [us] to test [us] . . . But [we shall] rejoice . . . as [we] share [in] Christ’s sufferings, that . . . [we may] be glad when his glory is revealed.”***

*Christian Suffering is Forged in the Suffering of Christ.* He met His fiery trial in His death upon the Altar of the Cross where He willingly gave His Body and shed His Blood to justify us before His heavenly Father, thereby paying the penalty for our sins, winning our forgiveness. Because of His atoning sacrifice on the Cross, we have no need to fear the trials and tribulations of the world for in Him our salvation is assured. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.