

No Surprise Suffering
1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11

There's a guy I know (I'll call him Bill) who planned a Canadian fly-in fishing trip for June of this year. He and his son, Jim, were really looking forward to the time together. The wise man that he is, Bill decided to buy trip insurance, just in case something happened. And it's a good thing that he did because COVID-19 happened. The U.S./Canada border is closed. There is no way the trip is going to happen. You would think that the insurance would kick in, and Bill would get his money back. You would think, but no. It's all there in the fine print. Both an alien invasion and a zombie apocalypse are covered, but not a pandemic. Even though this blow blindsided him, he has taken it in stride. Partly due to his calm and reserved nature he quickly resigned himself to the fact that he was going to lose a chunk of change.

None of us should feel blindsided when suffering comes our way. Peter puts it this way, *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.*

Some very popular preachers assure people that followers of Jesus will be blessed with good health, wealth, and security if only they believe. ... It's a lie, but people buy into it. Then, when they experience suffering and trials, their faith comes crashing down because it is built on a false foundation.

Jesus says something much different. Even as He called men to follow Him as His disciples, He described what it would be like. There was no hidden fine print. They would be reviled, persecuted, and evil things would be said about them because they followed Him. Jesus told them to rejoice and be glad when those things would happen, because their reward would be great in heaven (Matthew 5:11).

At other times, Jesus told the disciples they would be handed over to authorities to be beaten and punished. They would be hated by the world (John 15:18-19). He never hid the reality of suffering for His name's sake from His disciples.

But it's not all bad news. In John 16 Jesus told them, *I have said these things to you to keep you from falling away... I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you* (Vv.1, 4). He continues in our Gospel reading today assuring them that He prays for them (17:9).

They may not have felt like it, but they were prepared for what was to come. They would rely on the Holy Spirit to bring these words of Jesus to mind after Jesus was raised from the dead.

I have said several times from this pulpit that we should change our mission statement to: Come suffer with us! Peter was probably not thinking mission statement when he wrote this: *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* (4:12). It's there, though, isn't it? It's pretty much guaranteed that as a Christian you are going to suffer fiery trials because of your faith.

I have had fiery trials when I put too many jalapenos on my nachos – as I ate them, and a day or so later. I have also had fiery trials when I have spoken up for the truth in God's word. I have a vivid memory of a ministerial meeting my first year in the ministry. We were organizing a community event. A young man about my age addressed the group announcing that he wanted to set up a gay pride booth at the event. As I looked around the room, I realized that no one else was going to say anything, so I did. Very calmly and very politely I began to explain that because of what the Bible says about homosexuality it would not be appropriate to honor his request. I didn't get very far. I think

he must have come looking for a fight because he began to blast me with both barrels. I just sat there with my mouth hanging open as his seething anger hissed out venomous words.

I'm not the only one to have faced such fiery trials. One of my Seminary classmates sent out a mass e-mail this week inviting each of us to share what has happened in our lives over the last 29 years. When I counted this morning, 36 had replied. Several shared some of the fiery trials they experienced.

I'm guessing you have had some of your own. Those fiery trials are not fun. But are they bad? ... The world says, "Yes, all suffering is bad. Avoid it at all costs."

"Don't speak up to defend what is true and right. You might get attacked for it."

"If you experiencing emotional pain, drown it in drugs or alcohol – legal or illegal."

"If there is pain or heartache in your life because of your spouse, don't bother trying to work it out. Get a divorce. Move on."

"Suffering is bad. Get rid of it any way you can. Your life will be so much better."

It is easy to buy in to that way of thinking. It is what our sinful flesh wants to hear, and suffering is not fun. But it is also not all bad.

I'd have a hard time convincing you in the next few minutes that all suffering is not bad. But that's not my job. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. And He says to you through St. Peter: *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. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in*

that name... Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you... Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Dominion, power, and glory do belong to our God. Satan is not in charge. It may appear that way as he works to destroy us. But Jesus demonstrated that He is Lord of lords. Scripture tells us that Jesus descended into hell to announce His resurrection victory to all, right under the nose of Satan. Satan used people to lie about Jesus and falsely accuse him, resulting in His crucifixion, but no one took Jesus' life. He laid down his life willingly to be the perfect sacrifice for sin. What Satan intended for destruction, Jesus used for our salvation. When Jesus died and was laid in a tomb, Satan thought he had won. But the Lord of Life would not be contained. Jesus burst forth from the tomb declaring His victory over sin, death, and Satan.

We will not be blindsided by fiery trials. They will come, but they will not surprise us. Neither will they last forever. One day, Christ will come to lead us to the place He has prepared for us. At our death, or when He returns again in all His glory, Jesus will take us to be with Him in paradise forever. Amen.