



“SOMETHING’S HAPPENING HERE”
SCRIPTURE: 1 PETER 4: 12-14; 5: 6-11
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
May 24, 2020, Live Streamed
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

4:12 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.

4:13 But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

4:14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

5:6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

5:8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

5:9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

5:10 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.

5:11 To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

(video)

Is it just me or does it feel like we live a year on a roller coaster every week of COVID19. There is a repetitive pulse to this pandemic—energy surges and then lulls, strange twilight zone days where it seems like everyone is acting like nothing is happening and then a day of such intensity and despair and hostility that it feels like almost too much to bear.

That's just what's happening to the collective right now. Overlay that on top of what is happening in each of our households each week, and these are incredibly intense times. Our bodies are holding all the stress, all the unknowns, all these energy surges and energy drains. It's a lot to hold, a lot to process.

I guess this is what it feels like to be a part of a global pandemic—there's not much we can do to shift this energy that is tossing us around every week. We can only figure out what we need to do to stay afloat I guess. At least that's what I think on the really hard days—just stay in the moment, just stay present, just stay grounded.

But other times, I see that there is much more to this pandemic than just surviving. There is much more for us than just holding on for dear life. There's something else happening right now. Together, with God's help, maybe we can touch into that "something else" this morning.

The lectionary is actually hitting home runs pretty much every week right now. Chalk that up to the Holy Spirit, y'all. It's truly amazing!

You know what the lectionary is, right? It's the Bible divided up into three-year cycles. Believers and churches across the globe use it to determine what scripture we use in worship that week. So these passages are determined years in advance.

Which makes it all the more humbling and inspiring when passages seem to speak so directly to what is going on right here, right now.

So this week is one of those weeks.

The passage from 1 Peter that Richard read just a few minutes ago is about how Christians orient ourselves in a world of suffering and persecution. This passage is about how there are temptations all around, that try to get us confused about suffering and what it means for Jesus followers. We can get it so twisted up—we can feel victimized and isolated, when the suffering Jesus is trying to get us to understand, is the shared suffering humanity experiences at the hands of empire.

When you suffer because you follow Jesus—that suffering is different than the suffering caused by the injustices of empire.

But we get tempted to mix them all up and let suffering separate us or distort our thinking. What is tempting you these days? Despair? Self-loathing? Hatred? Rage?

Peter talks about the enemy, the devil, lurking around looking for someone to devour. What is threatening to devour you? What is the enemy?

We are just beginning to share in the hopelessness that we should feel when we truly touch in to the suffering of the world—that's not just the suffering caused by COVID19, but the suffering caused by empire.

This virus is sticking around because we've got a long way to go in this healing journey that Christ is inviting us on. God will always find a way to use the worst-case scenarios to try and set us free from the things that truly seek to devour us.

This global pandemic is changing us forever. And if Christians aren't changed in a way that liberates the world from all the oppressions that hold us captive, then we are on the wrong path.

Our siblings in Christ who are protesting and who want to get back to their buildings for services may have a liberative impulse driving them—stay with me for a minute, I am trying to be generous here. But, Peter is talking to persecuted Christians about how to position themselves to their persecution.

Here's where the sharp edge is for the Christian family—and I am not sure any of us are getting this right these days—and by "right" I mean Christ-centered.

Peter is saying suffering for what is right, being reviled because you are truly following Christ is a blessing. And the early church didn't just believe in doctrine and ideas that were disruptive to empire, they lived in ways that were disruptive to empire—to all the ways the empire wants submission, to all the ways empire wants us to make it our god.

So there is a sense in which our Christian siblings saying that the government shouldn't be able to tell the church what to do is right—the irony is that because of the absolutely bizarre and topsy turvey times we live in—their protest against the government has now revealed their collusion with the very powers and principalities they say they stand in opposition to.

Now the most powerful official in the empire's system has shown that he is using our Christian siblings to grasp at maintaining his political power.

The problem with the protests is that they are not doing anything to disrupt the oppressions and the systems that are truly doing harm in our world. Those protests may allow them to go to church face to face during a global pandemic—ok, you have the right to do something self-destructive. But, that's not what Peter and Jesus had in mind when they called believers in to a new relationship with suffering.

Christian suffering is redemptive when it serves Christ's liberating purpose—to alleviate the suffering of the world---and who is suffering these days? And who has been suffering at the hands of empire the most in the history of the United States? It is not white people who want to get back to their church buildings. That is not the suffering Peter had in mind.

In fact, white people not being able to go to church, not being able to move about freely, not being able to do what we want, not being able to trust the systems that are supposed to order our lives, not being able to be “normal,” this is the kind of suffering that may just be a pathway to some insights into who is really suffering in our world.

I'm not worried about us not being able to get to the church building. My heart is breaking, my body is activated, by soul is troubled because 100,000s of thousands of people are dying. And our country is leading the way in the COVID 19 death rate. We are leading in some horrible ways in world—and we have been for a long, long time.

The racial disparities of COVID19 are not new—the vulnerability we feel right way, the fear we have of going to the doctor or getting sick, or not getting the treatment we need, or being misdiagnosed, or not having access to a test, or being unprotected by our government—those are all feelings that black and brown people have lived with for generations in this country.

Having people yell at you because you have a mask on shouldn't make a Christian flinch. Try having someone threaten your life because of the skin you have on—or really because of the skin they have on. We live in a country where just being white allows you to get away with murder, terror, stealing, hoarding, harassing, endangering, and hating.

Living with the empire's most potent tool of oppression in the history of humankind—white capitalist supremacy culture, is a chronic disease.

So the fact that we are feeling weary, wary, worn, and are not sure what to do with all those feelings is just where we need to be right now. Feeling the hopelessness that is induced when empire is fighting for its life should be hard—and it should be the refiner's fire for our faith.

Peter is very clear on what faithful Jesus followers do when the Empire comes after us—we rejoice, we shout for joy—because in times of social chaos if the empire isn't upset with us, then we are irrelevant, we are not following Jesus. In fact, Peter might ask us, Grace Covenant, why we aren't getting more hostility about what we are doing right now.

The Gospel is threatening to empire and the Gospel's message of liberation of the oppressed is not just words, it is the way we live in the world.

What if the most liberating thing happening in our lives right now is this fiery trial—this roller coaster ride that we're on that is leaving no question as to our society's priorities—it is not the well being of the most vulnerable. You can see that right?

Because if the well being of the most vulnerable were the top priority of our society, then prisons and meat packing plants and skilled nursing facilities and black and brown communities and the working poor would not be the ones suffering the most right now.

If the well being of the vulnerable were our society's top priority, or even Christianity's top priority, then the ones feeling this pandemic the most would be the keepers of empire, those who have hoarded resources and power and social capital—but look around—they are weathering this trial with chilling tenacity—who's getting bailed out? Not hourly workers. Whose getting tested whenever they want to? Not prisoners locked up in jails and detention centers with outbreaks.

Who's getting the attention of the government to change their course on protecting the public from this virus? Not those provoking economic or racial justice.

No, the ones getting the attention of the government are the ones saying the government's tyranny is about being able to walk in a church building, or walk in a restaurant with a bazooka or automatic weapon, or to not have to wear a mask, or to just generally not have to consider their impact on the rest of the planet, or the ones saying it's ok for workers to live on the razor's edge and be one pay check away from homelessness or destitution, but it's not ok for corporate America to have to give some things up, or for the richest 1% to have to have less even in a global pandemic.

If you're feeling uncomfortable, if you are feeling discouraged, demoralized, disturbed, and disgusted—then something's happening here that needed to happen. Grace Covenant, if we are paying attention then we should be struggling right now—struggling to discern what this all means for the likes of us.

Peter's words could have been written just for us, just for today—just for May 24, 2020 in Western North Carolina in a global pandemic.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that God may exalt you in due time.

5:7 Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.

5:8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

5:9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

5:10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to eternal glory in Christ, will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

5:11 To God be the power forever and ever

Let Peter's Gospel message settle into to your activated, weary, wary bodies. Jesus is leading the way for us in the pandemic. And it's not the way of the familiar. It's not just about band aids on the wounds of our world, it's about the world finding a way for all to be well—for us all to be well together.

The shocking thing is not that some in our human family are being used by empire to confuse and bewilder us. The shocking thing is that it has taken us this long to really feel it in our bones.

Jesus didn't live in our shoes to help keep economic systems humming along. Jesus didn't suffer at the hands of an angry and fearful empire because he was seeking their blessing of his work. Jesus didn't die on a cross so we could have the freedom to ignore the most vulnerable in our midst.

You get the picture, Grace Covenant. Jesus lived, died, and rose for our sins to be laid bare. And so look at them—so starkly laid bare today.

The devil, the enemy, will tempt you toward despair when you see them. The enemy, will tempt you to think that you need to look away, to distract yourselves because it's too much. Don't look away—remember whose footsteps you are following—Christ will give you all the stamina, all the strength you need to turn this fiery trial toward the healing of the world.

The thing is we're going to need each other to keep going—especially when it gets harder. And it will get harder. COVID 19 isn't going away anytime soon—and it's better at adapting than we are. So, give your anxiety to God, and rejoice that we share this trial with a savior who knows how to put it to good use.

There's something happening here, Grace Covenant.

It is chaotic. It is upsetting. It is destabilizing. It is demoralizing. It is frightening. But Christ is calling us not to rush to comfort, not to grasp at normalcy. Keep resisting the temptation to revert to a way of life that needed to change. We need to change. The world needs to change. Find the glimmers of hope in your capacity to share in the hopelessness that has gripped our country's most vulnerable people for too long.

You heard Peter, don't miss the healing opportunity of this fiery trial because the Spirit of God is resting on you—making those strange sensations happening within you, the early birth pangs of the redemption of the world.

Thanks be to God.

(show video again)

More information about some of the images:

New study on fake Twitter accounts and COVID 19 misinformation:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/20/859814085/researchers-nearly-half-of-accounts-tweeting-about-coronavirus-are-likely-bots>

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-twitter-bots-1004328/>

Neuse Correctional Institute, Goldsboro, NC:

<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/coronavirus/article242133306.html>

Vaccine News and Stock Uproar:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/health/coronavirus-vaccine-moderna.html>