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“Christians in an Unchristian World: Suffering”

Text: 1 Peter 4:1-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight, the rubber meets the road for Peter. The first three chapters of Peter’s first letter were important - to know who we are as baptized Christians, that we’re being built as living stones into the living temple of the Church, and that we live in love in the places and under the authorities God has placed over us. But Peter’s words to us tonight are what all that was leading up to: *suffering*. Or, when the rubber meets the road and leaves a skid mark on us.

Sadly, this is sometimes the speed bump that causes some to veer off the road of Christianity, and some to veer off the road of life altogether. It is why assisted suicide and so-called mercy killing continues to grow in popularity and public acceptance. We don’t want to suffer. For Christians and non-Christians alike, the ideal life would be a smooth, straight road, all downhill, and always with the wind at your back. And many are looking for a God or a god who will give them just that.

But man’s ideal is not man’s reality. It *was*, in the beginning, but then sin took care of that. Adam’s work became toil, Eve’s childbearing became painful, and brother turned against brother. And though many things have changed and progressed across the centuries, that reality has not. Suffering became the new normal, quite contrary to what the serpent had promised.

But when the Son of God came into our world in the flesh, the ideal became reality again. A perfect man unstained by sin once again trod this earth. And through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He paved the way to eternal life, though the way will still not be smooth, straight, all downhill, and with the wind always at your back. It will still be hard and it will still involve suffering.

Because you will have to wrestle with your sinful flesh and its passions which oppose the way of Christ. You will have to endure both the enticements and the attacks of the sinful world, which wants you to go *its* way and will hate you when you don’t. You will be under seige from satan, who wants to wear you down and wear you out so that you give in. And you will even have crosses sent from your Father in heaven for your good, though you will be tempted to see them as not good, and sent not in your Father’s love but in His anger. Which is all to say: suffering is not an abberation; suffering is the norm for the Christian Church. Which is why 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.*

And so also Peter began this chapter: *Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.*

*Arm yourselves*, which means to be ready. Soldiers arm themselves when expecting attack. So you, too, expect to be attacked, and so be ready for it.

*Arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.* Or, with the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ who came to help the helpless, to love the loveless, to serve the lowly and outcast, to forgive the sinner, to suffer for the suffering, and to die for the dying. The mind of Christ which is not me first, but you first. The mind of Christ which seeks not to hold your sins against you, but to cover your sins. To cover them with His blood, that they be washed away in His forgiveness. That is the mind of Christ given to you and each Christian in baptism. But think that, do that, and like Christ, you will suffer for it.

But when you do, Peter also says, *rejoice! Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.* Which doesn't mean that our sufferings atone for our sins, as Christ's did - that could never be. And it doesn't *need* to be - Christ has done it all. He atoned for all the sin of all the world, yours and mine included. *It is finished*, He said on the cross (John 19:30), and it was. 100% complete. Nothing more need be done. But when you suffer for being a Christian, when you suffer for the truth, when you suffer for doing good, when you suffer because you are a baptized child of God, you are being treated just as Jesus was and in that way sharing in His suffering. And when that happens, Peter goes on to say, you are blessed, *because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.* The Holy Spirit, who is making you holy now, and will glorify you in the end.

And *the end of all things is at hand*, Peter also says. You know, whenever I hear that or something like that, I always think of the cartoonish characters who stand on street corners with a sign that says: *The end is near!* Which I think Satan likes because when we think that way we then dismiss the thought, just like we dismiss the crazy carrying the sign as a kook.

And yet it's true. *Man knows not his time.* How often are we surprised when we hear of someone dying suddenly, having a heart attack, random acts of violence taking someone, sometimes in what is called the prime of life. The end always *is* at hand. And the closer the end gets, the more Satan will rage against the Church and the truth.

But do not fear or fear him. Instead, Peter says, go on serving one another to the glory of God. For Satan cannot harm those who are in Christ. And if the end is at hand, that also means this: your salvation is at hand - the end of your suffering and your rest and peace

with Christ Jesus. For at the end of Jesus' baptizing hand, His absolving hand, and His feeding hand, is the end of your sin and thus the beginning of your life. *Jesus leading us on till our rest is won* (LSB #718).

Which we will always need, for as long as we live in this world and life, our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires will not be pure and without sin. While the new man in us ceases from sin because in baptism He has died to sin, the old Adam in us will continue to rebel. We'll never like suffering and seek to avoid it. But as Christians living in an unchristian world, Peter concludes with this: ***Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.***

Trust the Word of God. Trust His promises. Trust His faithfulness. Don't give up doing good for He who created you also re-creates you, and He who gave you life will give you new and eternal life when He raises you up on the last day. Until then, it won't be easy. ***The righteous are scarcely saved***, Peter writes - the dangers of false belief and false gods abound. The attacks and the suffering will continue. Of that you can be sure. But of this you can be sure as well: *in Christ you are safe*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.