

"Are You Surprised?"
1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11

June 5, 2011

7th Sunday of Easter

Last week was Memorial Day, a time to remember and honor those brave men and women who gave their lives in defending our country. One of the mainstays of these celebrations is a big Memorial Day parade. However, in recent times, many communities, especially bigger cities have canceled Memorial Day parades and commemorations. The reason? Just not enough people were interested in marching in the parades. People wanted to get away and enjoy themselves in the fun and good times of a "long weekend." When other participants followed suit, the fathers of these communities had to drop the Memorial Day observances.

I got to thinking about that and wondered if there might be some other reason involved, too. Perhaps, people are not interested in Memorial Day because it forces us to confront the suffering that so many people had to endure. We don't like the thought of suffering. In fact, in our society, we want to avoid it at all costs. When suffering comes, we want a pill to relieve it immediately. Think of all the money that is paid out for doctors and specialists, medical procedures and treatments to eliminate pain and suffering. We think we can avoid pain and suffering in our lives or at least we hope so.

That kind of thinking also infiltrates the way we think about God. We get the idea that, if we follow Jesus Christ, our lives should be free of pain and suffering or at least having less than an unbeliever's life. Many of the popular preachers on TV preach a "health and wealth" gospel that says, "If you follow Jesus Christ and have enough faith, then all of your pain and suffering, all your problems and troubles, will go away." Followers of such preachers are often surprised when suffering comes upon them. The only answer such preachers can give their listeners is that they didn't have enough faith which surprises them even more.

However, in our text today, Peter tells us not to be surprised when suffering comes to us. He says, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." What kind of suffering does he mean here? He's not talking about suffering

in general like sickness, poor health, financial problems or the like, nor does he mean the suffering that may occur as punishment for a crime or wrong doing. He's talking specifically about suffering as a Christian. If you actively and accurately profess and confess your faith and live in a way pleasing to the will of Jesus Christ instead of the will of the culture, you should count on suffering, rather than being surprised by it. You may be thinking, "Well, those people in Peter's time were persecuted and executed for their faith back then. They were such strong Christians, but what does that have to do with me? We have freedom of religion here in America." Peter wasn't talking about that. When Peter wrote his letter, the government had not yet begun persecuting and executing Christians. The persecution Peter was talking about was persecution by other people, unbelievers, in the forms of slander, ridicule, and, reproach.

Those kinds of things are happening to Christians in America today.

- A kindergartner in New York was told she could not pray before snack time.
- In California, a high school student was suspended for passing out invitations to a church event outside his classroom, before the school day began.

City Councilman Hashmel Turner of Fredricksburg, VA was prohibited from ending his prayers at council meetings "in Jesus' name."

A football coach in East Brunswick, NJ was prohibited from bowing his head during a student-led prayer

The list could go on and on.

Perhaps you have experienced similar things in your lives. If you are actively involved in speaking of your faith in Jesus Christ and making every attempt to live as He would have you live, you most likely will experience such persecutions, although perhaps not as dramatic as the ones I mentioned. You could be mocked as being "too religious" and "not being in the real world" by friends and fellow workers if you speak of your faith. You might be laughed at if you placed church activities as a higher priority in your life than sports or social activities. You could get in trouble at work for refusing to lie for a superior or "fudge" on your paper work.

It's tough being a Christian these days. We don't like that kind of persecution. So, what do we do? Many times, we change our behavior to "fit in" or "get along", even if our new behavior contradicts what we know the will of God to be. We modify our beliefs so that they are accepted by our culture. Or, we complain and feel sorry for ourselves. We pray and ask, "Why me, Lord? Why are you letting these awful things happen to me?" It's a good question. Why do these things happen?

Memorial Day gives us a clue. When we honor veterans, we are not really surprised that they have been injured or died. Suffering and death are logical consequences of war. In the same way, as Christians, we are not merely members of a religious institution. We are involved in a war -- a spiritual war with Satan as our enemy. As Paul wrote in Ephesians, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph. 6:12) Peter wrote in our text, Satan is "like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." His greatest desire is to lead us into sin and against God.

This war, like all others, involves suffering and death. When Jesus Christ entered this world to do battle against Satan in our place, it was no easy bed of roses. Even though He was the Son of God, with all the power and might of the universe, he went the path of suffering, the path to the cross so that all our sins, which we had committed out of weakness or willful intent, might be paid for in God's court of justice. To that end, even though the world considered Him a failure and a laughing stock, He was successful through suffering. His death made us right with God.

This is no "cheap grace" that has saved us. It is costly grace. It cost the Son of God His life. If that is so, how can we expect to skate through life without suffering as well? When we continue following in the way of our Lord, we shall receive from this sinful world the same as He did. We shall suffer as Christ suffered. Jesus is very clear about this: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Now, given the fact that suffering will occur as we follow Christ, we *can* continue to complain or feel sorry. But Peter has a different idea. He says we can rejoice. Now there's a strange response to suffering, but it's one we can have. We can rejoice when people snicker at us for being religious. We can rejoice when people gossip about us for being so "straight laced". We can rejoice even when following Jesus Christ may cost us money, prestige, friends, or a job. And why? Peter says, "rejoice insofar as you Christ's sufferings." Suffering for our faith may seem bad, but it means we are on the right track. It means we are following our Lord faithfully.

Suffering is also proof of God's activity in our lives. People do not naturally seek abuse, insult, and persecution. When we seek to do the Lord's will and voluntarily accept these suffering and problems, it shows that God's Holy Spirit is working in us. Peter says, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." Suffering for the name of Christ -- even if it is little things like insults, strange looks, and criticism, -- shows that God's Spirit is indeed active in our lives.

There's even a greater reason for rejoicing. Unlike the wars of our country which end with our fathers, brothers, and sons in their grave, this spiritual war doesn't end with pain, suffering, and death. It transcends them with triumph and glory. For Christ did more than overcome our sins. He overcame Satan, the one who induces us to sin, and he overcame the consequence of our sin, death. He did that by doing something so astounding and so amazing that it had never been done before or since. He rose from the dead. And, what's more, He promises to us, His followers, that we, too, shall have the same power to overcome death and live again eternally in heaven.

We can rejoice because, just as Jesus' suffering led to glory, we know our suffering leads to glory. We can get so focused on the trials and difficulties that we go through as Christians here in this life, that we can forget that there is something far better waiting for us in heaven where there is no insult or criticism, only commendation by our Lord; where there is no trouble, only happiness; where there is no conflict, only peace. It was this joyous thought that caused Peter to begin his letter to

those suffering persecution by saying, "*Praise* be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade -- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trial."

My friends, continue to be faithful to your Lord. Continue to speak of Jesus Christ in your every day life and to share your faith, even if it is not well received or brings criticism. Continue to confess the teachings of Holy Scripture, even if others reject them. Continue to live as God wants you to live, even if that is thought of as being "old fashioned" and causes you to be ridiculed and insulted. And continue to rejoice. Rejoice because you are following in the way of our Lord! Rejoice because His Holy Spirit is at work in your lives! Rejoice because heavenly glory is waiting for you! As Paul says in Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always" -- and that includes suffering for His name's sake. And, as Peter himself said, "And 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."