

“WHAT CHRIST’S SUFFERING DID.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

May 29, 2016, 10:30AM

Text for the Sermon: I Peter 3:17 – 4:1

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for your true and eternal Word and that you have not left us in the dark. Cause your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, grant us understanding. Honor your Word and edify your people according to our need. In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction.

One of the benefits of preaching through books of the Bible is that we are fed the whole counsel of God’s Word and not just a pastors pet passages or topics. Also it means that we will hear sermons on hard texts, like this one which is considered one of most difficult in the NT.

It’s a hard text for two reasons. *First*, it’s hard because there are some hard to understand phrases in it. *Second*, it’s hard because it’s about suffering for righteousness sake and that’s hard for many of us white, upper middle class, Americans to relate to.

Christians in America represent a very small percentage of Christians in the world, less than 1%. American history is a very small percentage of world history, less than 5%.

So American Christianity is a very tiny picture of Christianity. Because this is all we know we tend to think this is how it is everywhere. That bubble has been burst a bit by the images of ISIS killing Christians and waves of Christians fleeing their countries.

For most Christians in the world today they know what it means to suffer. For most of history Christians have known what it means to suffer for their faith. For most Christians in most of the world through most of history being a Christian was not safe.

I remember well preaching in Albania and feeling very much out of my depth. What business did I an affluent white American have preaching to poor Eastern Europeans just coming out of 50 years of severe atheistic Communist tyranny, every Christian living under the threat of death?

So how do I preach this text to you in a way that is both faithful to the passage and relevant? Where are the connection points for us? It's a hard text.

Maybe we could try to put ourselves in the wooden shoes of our Dutch forefathers who came to this part of Washington and labored long and hard to clear the forests and give us this fruitful and abundant crop land. But that wasn't suffering for their faith.

Maybe we could try to put ourselves in the boots of those who laid down their lives for us so we could enjoy all this freedom and prosperity we have today. Lots of people suffered and died for our sake. But that wasn't suffering for their faith.

Maybe we could try to put ourselves in the bare feet of those fleeing for their very lives all across the world today because of their faith, many of them dying at the hands of ruthless terrorists.

But all of that is so distant and remote, a faint thought. Oh, once in a while we feel a little sting from what some people in Bellingham say about Lynden. Maybe a bit from those who differ with us on some moral or political or social issue. A few of you are in families where there is someone who opposes you and your faith outwardly, vocally. For others it's peer pressure.

The Gospel for those who suffer, vss. 17-18.

How does this passage speak to our lives? The harder the passage the more important it is to look at the context of the passage. That's why I had us read the verse before and the verse after this text. What is Peter talking about?

In verse 17 Peter says sometimes it is God's will that we suffer for doing good. Then in verse 18 he says Christ Himself suffered for doing good. Then in chapter 4:1 he says since Christ suffered in the flesh you also should be prepared to suffer for doing what is good or right. It is normal for Christians to suffer and be hated and mocked and slandered and lied about.

And don't be surprised if even your best works and words still get criticized or slandered. It is better to be slandered for doing good than for doing evil, so don't stop doing good.

Christians who suffer are sharing in Christ's sufferings and they know that no suffering can hinder God's purposes, and that suffering actually accomplishes God's purposes.

God uses suffering in our lives for several purposes, to test us or train us, to strengthen us, to enable us to comfort others and have compassion on those who suffer. He uses it to discipline us. He loves us and treats us as sons and shows His love through discipline, correction, rebuke.

God even brings suffering to those around us, those we love, to get our attention. Someone is caught in some sin and it makes us examine our own hearts and lives. Or at least it should have that effect.

The Gospel of suffering reminds us when Jesus suffered unjustly God vindicated Him, God made Him alive and empowered Him with His Spirit, and God will do the same for us.

There is a contrast here between suffering in the flesh and being made alive in the spirit. What is suffered in the flesh is temporal, temporary, not to be compared with what we will enjoy in the spirit, in eternity.

The Gospel proclaimed by Noah, vss. 19-20.

Peter illustrates the Gospel of suffering by reminding us of the Gospel of Noah. The way he says it has caused no small amount of spilled ink. There are at least five major theories of what these two verses mean. Since this is a sermon and not a lecture I am not going to talk about what they all are. I will give a brief explanation of what I think based on my study with a few reasons of support and then get to how it relates to us.

In I Peter 1:11 the prophets were said to have the Spirit of Christ in them. In II Peter 2:5 Peter calls Noah a herald of righteousness, or a preacher of righteousness. Christ in the Spirit came to earth at the time leading up to the flood and preached through the mouth of Noah to the unbelievers. The message was the Gospel, a clear call to repent and believe in God for their salvation.

So why does Peter call them spirits and why does he say they are in prison? They are spirits at the time of Peter's writing, they were the disobedient people on earth back in Noah's time when Christ preached to them. They continued in there disobedience and now they are in hell.

If you say Pastor Robert was born in 1956 that's technically not accurate. I wasn't a pastor when I was born. But we say that understanding the meaning to be "I, who is now a pastor, was born in 1956."

So Peter means the spirits who are now in prison were alive on earth when they were preached to by Noah through the power of the Spirit of Christ. But whether this interpretation or another is right, so what? What does Noah have to do with Christians in the time of Peter or now? Let me draw several parallels between then and now (see Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, p. 168ff).

Noah and his family were a minority among hostile unbelievers, as were the believers in Peter's day and increasingly in our day.

Noah was faithful among the unbelievers, following and obeying God and suffering for righteousness sake. He spoke up regarding God and sin and judgment. He witnessed in words and actions to those around him who were in danger of perishing. He gave an answer for the hope he had, he endured the mocking of those who thought he was a fool. Peter encouraged the saints then and now to be bold witnesses to those who are facing God's wrath apart from Christ.

Christ by His Spirit preaches through Noah and all Christians as His ambassadors, His witnesses. We are carried along by the Spirit and helped by the Spirit. Marc, by the Holy Spirit, has had opportunities to speak to some in jail about the hope and salvation he has. Pray that his witness is effective. Be ready, be prepared, don't fear, don't shrink back from any opportunity.

In Noah's day God announced judgment and waited and gave time for repentance. The time of repentance and salvation is now for the day of God's judgment is coming sooner than any can know. God is patient, but there is an end.

Noah believed the covenant promises of God by faith and was saved. We are saved in the same way, by believing the covenant promises of God made to us in the Gospel.

The believers in Peter's day felt as though they were few in number, that they were in the minority. Peter encourages them and builds them up to hope in their salvation that is secure and kept in heaven for them. Christ has triumphed over sin and death and the grave, and so will they, and so will we. Don't grow weary, don't lose heart.

Take the example of Noah to heart, be bold, be confident, be hopeful, trust in God's salvation and in the power of His Spirit in you. Don't be discouraged by all the evil in the world and the encroaching darkness, God has triumphed over it before and He will again.

The Gospel proclaimed in baptism, vs. 21.

Peter sees a parallel in this story to baptism. God had mercy on righteous Noah and his wife and even his children and they were saved through the water. He compares baptism to escaping from sin and death through the waters.

The waters of baptism were a symbol of doing down into the grave. As though we have died and been raised to new life. As Noah fled into the ark, so we flee to Christ and escape God's judgment and wrath in Christ.

But what about the phrase "baptism now saves you"? We have all been told many times that baptism doesn't save us, faith in Jesus saves us. Is this some new Gospel?

Peter gives a clue when he says what saves us is not the outward act, like the washing away of dirt, but the inward spiritual reality that baptism is a symbol of, that we have been made clean by God. A clean conscience is another way of saying a new heart, a forgiven soul, a renewed mind. For a sinner to have a clean conscience takes the blood of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins.

This brings us back to what Peter said at the beginning of this passage. Jesus is the one who brings us to God and reconciles us to our Heavenly Father through His suffering once and for all for the sins of the unrighteous.

Hebrews 9:14 and 10:22 speak in this way, that the blood of Jesus purifies our consciences before God.

Hebrews 10:22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The Gospel of baptism says that I am clean only because of the blood of Jesus and the power of His resurrection. Jesus descended to the depths of sin and death and hell and rose again victorious. And He raises up with Him all who have faith in Him. Like Noah in the ark, for us judgment, wrath, death, destruction are all past.

Baptism is making an appeal to God by faith to save us and forgive us based on what Jesus did for us in His crucifixion and resurrection.

The Gospel proclaimed in resurrection and ascension, vs. 22.

Peter concludes with the resurrection and the ascension of Christ into heaven. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, meaning He has all power and

authority. Jesus rules and reigns over all the universe, over the physical realm and the spiritual realm, over all good and over all evil.

Satan and all his demons are not free. They don't roam the earth doing whatever they want. They are all subject to Christ and under His authority and control. They are like dogs on a leash; like pawns in His hands doing His bidding until He returns and puts a final end to all of them.

Our text began with Jesus suffering and being put to death in the flesh, then being made alive in the Spirit and finally going into heaven. Jesus' suffering is our example, Jesus' ascension is our hope. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead, it at work in us also. As God vindicated Noah by delivering him and as God vindicated Jesus, so He will vindicate us.

Implications and Application.

If you ever find yourself feeling like you are in a minority because of your faith, stand firm and don't grow weary, God will vindicate you in the end, you will be gloriously victorious.

If you or someone you love has ever experienced any form of injustice or unfair treatment because of faith, integrity, honesty, not going along, or maybe you sense the lack of justice in our world, people who should receive it are getting off easy, those who should have mercy are treated too harshly. It happens at school, at work, in criminal justice.

If you find yourself wrestling with fear over what others will say or think about you or your morality or your integrity or your way of raising your kids or how you spend Sundays.

If you are suffering in any way for doing what is good and true and right, for what is righteous and holy, consider Noah and Christ.

Would you rather be with Noah in the ark, or on the outside laughing and mocking and making fun of what he believed? Don't be one who refused to suffer for righteousness sake and is now in eternal prison. Noah and Christ are our example and our hope of vindication.

Whatever may seem unclear in this passage, let us firmly believe and live what is clear.

This is a call to courageous living.

This is a call to lay aside any fear of man, to fear God.

This is a call to stand firm in your faith, whatever the cost.

This is a call to suffer for Christ's sake and for the sake of the lost.

This is a call to live in a way that makes the Gospel visible, to show God's grace in our lives.

I Peter 3:18, 22 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, ... [and He] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ who for us and for our salvation endured the cross and was crucified, dead, and buried, enduring all the punishment of hell for us. We bless you and praise you this morning for the humanly incomprehensible thing that you did on the cross. You have utterly and absolutely remove all the fear from what would otherwise be the most fearful thing of our existence – death and eternal judgment in hell. Because of your vindication, ours also awaits us.

