

“Be Clearheaded”
1 Peter 4:12-5:11
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #57
7th Sunday of Easter
11th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic

1 Peter 4:12-5:11

12 Dear friends, don't be surprised about the fiery trials that have come among you to test you. These are not strange happenings. **13** Instead, rejoice as you share Christ's suffering. You share his suffering now so that you may also have overwhelming joy when his glory is revealed. **14** If you are mocked because of Christ's name, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory—indeed, the Spirit of God—rests on you. **15** Now none of you should suffer as a murderer or thief or evildoer or rebel. **16** But don't be ashamed if you suffer as one who belongs to Christ. Rather, honor God as you bear Christ's name. Give honor to God, **17** because it's time for judgment to begin with God's own household. But if judgment starts with us, what will happen to those who refuse to believe God's good news? **18** If the righteous are barely rescued, what will happen to the godless and sinful? **19** So then, those who suffer because they follow God's will should commit their lives to a trustworthy creator by doing what is right.

5 Therefore, I have a request for the elders among you. (I ask this as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings, and as one who shares in the glory that is about to be revealed.) I urge the elders: **2** Like shepherds, tend the flock of God among you. Watch over it. Don't shepherd because you must, but do it voluntarily for God. Don't shepherd greedily, but do it eagerly. **3** Don't shepherd by ruling over those entrusted to your care, but become examples to the flock. **4** And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive an unfading crown of glory. **5** In the same way, I urge you who are younger: accept the authority of the elders. And

everyone, clothe yourselves with humility toward each other. God stands against the proud, but he gives favor to the humble. **6** Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. **7** Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. **8** Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. **9** Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. **10** After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. **11** To him be power forever and always. Amen.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Since April 26, we have been in 1 Peter. Honestly, I've enjoyed delving into this letter as I don't think I've ever paid much attention to it since the Apostle Paul overshadows the other epistles. And if it hadn't been for my time in Grand Rapids, MI at the Calvin Symposium in January, I wouldn't have been so eager to dig through this letter.

This letter by Peter or someone acting in Peter's name is written to a group of "God's chosen strangers in the world of the diaspora" who live in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Rome's grasp had a stranglehold over numerous people and Rome demanded obedience to an Emperor who considered himself divine. These "chosen strangers", Gentiles who became Christians, rejected not only Rome's ways, but also some family and friends. These Christians are feeling a pinch and need encouragement.

And encouragement they receive from Peter. He reminds the Christians that their spiritual ancestors, the Jews, wandered in the desert for decades before they reached home. The

prophets long ago foretold “the grace that [would eventually be] received”, but even they could not fully understand what, or rather, who the grace was: Christ Jesus.

Peter continues in the letter with a household code. The slaves come first and Peter holds them up as role models for everyone to follow. These slaves are suffering far worse than the other freed Christians because they are in harsh conditions. Yet, they still believe. And these suffering servants reflect the ultimate Suffering Servant: Jesus Christ. For Peter reminds the 1st century audience that all of them were called to a particular type of endurance because Christ suffered on their behalf and that he left them an example of how to live their lives in hardship. Peter then declares that the sure foundation of these Christians and for us, too, is found in no one else but in Jesus Christ.

During these difficult times, Peter encourages the Christians to be compassionate to one another. It will take everyone to work together to navigate through this hardship of losing status in the Empire and facing eventual persecution. Peter also reminds these Gentile Christians that they are to not stoop to the level of the people who slander and falsely accuse them because that is not how Christ acted. Christ didn't respond insult with insult. Instead, he treated all people with love and compassion and that is what we are called to do.

Today's verses make up the end before Peter's final greeting. Peter continues to hit home with his congregants that while they have suffered and are suffering, that doesn't mean the suffering will end anytime soon. It will get more intense, like fiery trials. While they may face intense hardship in their suffering, the Spirit of the LORD rests upon them and they are not alone! Additionally, in his encouragement, Peter reminds them that their LORD and Savior suffered and they can share in Christ's suffering with a hopeful joy when he will eventually be revealed and all will be made well.

I should also say that something peculiar happens toward the end of chapter four. Not only is there suffering, but also judgment. And it's not just the "bad guys" who will be judged, but everyone.....starting with "God's own household" in 4:17.

Man, these people can't catch a break.

But, it's not all doom and gloom. In these words, Peter is reminding his 1st century audience that no one, except Jesus Christ, is perfect. Everyone has impurities that need to be consumed by fiery trial and judgement. And in this time of trial and judgement, we are not to give up living lives that reflect our Savior.

Then, Peter pivots to the leaders in the congregations in chapter 5. He reminds the elders to lead out of love and not obligation. And it is for times such as this that the elders in the congregation keep a watchful eye over their flocks in order to minister to a weary people. Likewise, those who are not as experienced in their faith as the elders are to accept the elders' authority. Ultimately, everyone, regardless of status in the church, is to practice humility because God favors the humble.

In all these words Peter is trying to tell his congregations, he makes a point to issue a series of warnings: Stay humble, stay clearheaded, stay calm, resist the devil, and stay alert. And it should be noted that these Christians are NOT failing in such areas. Again, Peter is encouraging them to remain committed because the devil is on the loose. Now, I need to say that "devil" means a generic accuser or adversary. This accuser comes in the form of physical and spiritual forces. For these 1st century Christians, the "devil" is very much the Roman Empire who keeps taunting and tempting them to turn their backs on God and to embrace the false gods of Rome. These Gentile Christians can either continue in the Christian life and suffer for a while or turn back to their old ways and avoid abuse.

As our ancestors read Peter's words, especially these warnings, he urges them to not focus on the "what ifs" and the suffering they will endure, but to cast their anxieties on the LORD in order to be clearheaded. And as they stand firm on the Foundation of their faith, Jesus Christ, these frightened people rest on the promise that the LORD will restore and empower these people.

Stay humble, stay clearheaded, stay calm, resist the devil, and stay alert.

That's hard to do during the good and bad times. I imagine for us in the 21st century, these words couldn't have come at a better moment. These warnings Peter issued to his congregants across the Roman Empire remind us to be firm in our faith. It is easy to focus on the anxiety instead of casting our anxiety on the One who deserves our focus: Jesus Christ. And yet, these little devils that taunt and tempt us to give into our carnal instincts instead of relying on our Savior during difficulties are on the loose. Resisting the tendencies to simply give up is a long struggle and these devils take many forms in our day that feed our fear. When we give into these devils that are like lions ready to devour, we pit groups of people against each other, dehumanize those who are unknown to us, or cast blame on vulnerable people. Yet, we have been promised that in good and bad, our LORD calms our weary souls. As stanza four of our first hymn today says:

*"When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."*

We aren't promised an easy life, but we are promised we are not alone. There will be trials and suffering for a moment, but they will be eclipsed by the joy of ultimately living in the presence of our Savior who has conquered sin and all its dreadful effects by his life, death, and resurrection.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.