**Sermon 1 Peter 2:19-25 (Easter 4A)**

INTRO

It is difficult to overstate how vastly different the world of the text is from our own world. And yet, we read from this book, from this ancient collection of writing, a human response to God, sacred scripture – yes, a sacrament of the sacred – yes. And so, it is a grave and important responsibility that we must treat it wisely. The truth is every time we crack the Scriptures of the Old and New testaments open, we run the risk of mis-reading, mis-interpreting and mis-applying its wisdom. Transplanting it directly into our own world, our context without taking the time to diligently seek out the ways in which that can harm others today.

THE SERIES

We are in the midst of this series, focusing on the life of the church. We celebrated Lent, Holy Week and Easter and on the run up to Pentecost (the Sunday when we commemorate the birth of the church) your pastors decided that it might be a good idea to see what we could learn from a little-known book of First Peter that’s stuck in at the end of the New Testament. And we thought that there might be something in these words that might encourage and challenge us in St Andrew today. That would connect to our experience of living out our faith in our very own trying times. And so, we have in front of us today these words from chapter 2 (as has already been read), but let me re-read it from The Message, starting in verse 19:

***19*** *What counts is that you put up with it for God’s sake when you’re treated badly for no good reason. There’s no particular virtue in accepting punishment that you well deserve. But if you’re treated badly for good behavior and continue in spite of it to be a good servant, that is what counts with God.* ***21-25****This is the kind of life you’ve been invited into, the kind of life Christ lived. He suffered everything that came his way so you would know that it could be done, and also know how to do it, step-by-step. ‘He never did one thing wrong, not once said anything amiss.’ They called him every name in the book and he said nothing back. He suffered in silence, content to let God set things right. He used his servant body to carry our sins to the Cross so we could be rid of sin, free to live the right way. His wounds became your healing.”*

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I don’t know about you but after reading this a few times this week I was tempted to get off the First Peter train, “being treated badly for no good reason” – nope! “This is the kind of life you’ve been invited into” – nope! But [PAUSE] *if* we are to stay with this letter, I invite us to lean in together. *If* we are to find wisdom in this text, we must first understand the context in which it was written, perhaps even deduce the purpose for which it was written, and bring our 21st-century knowledge of trauma and abuse to bear on this ancient text; And to be crystal clear about *the risks* of applying any text like this, that claims suffering as a noble act that connect us to Christ and the will of God. [PAUSE] But why? Why even make such a connection in the first place?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To understand that, we need delve into the historical context, the world of the text. Although the first generation of disciples and witnesses actually saw and loved Jesus, these later believers that received this letter must believe without that powerful, personal, emotional and spiritual experience. But not just that, you see, theses later believer lived at a time of horrific persecution against Christians. Sanctioned directly from the all-powerful emperor in Rome. And that is a reality that is so far from our own experience, our own imaginations. And it is since their faith and the practice of their faith exacts a price in the various forms of suffering, the question “what’s it worth?” must inevitably arise. And so, First Peter proposes that readers make an exchange between their beaten bodies and that of Christ crucified, “by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet 2:24). And he seems to make this connection between the suffering they are experiencing and Christ’s suffering in order to make meaning out of something senseless and seemly meaning-less. The author say that it is precisely because of suffering, both theirs and the model provided by that of Christ, connects them more deeply to Christ.

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Now most of us have heard this logic before, maybe even offered it up to someone who was experiencing some hardship or have been subjected to it during our own hard times. It is logic that has given hope to many of our spiritual and faith ancestors.

CONTEMPORARY STORY

For example, in the 16th through the 18th centuries, during the period of the “Penal Laws” enforced by England, any public expression of the Catholic faith in Ireland was prohibited. Churches were closed, the ritual of Mass/eucharist was outlawed, Catholics faced fines and imprisonment for practicing their faith, and priests were threatened with death for tending to their congregants. That was the time when Catholics gathered in remote and isolated spots to celebrate Mass in secret, secluded outdoor locations, making use or large rocks or boulders as altars. It just so happens that there is a Mass Rock on my family’s land. You wouldn’t notice it unless you knew where to look and what to look for. But along a secluded track there is a large rock, integrated now into the hedge row, with the roots of hawthorn and hazel trees encroaching around it, rooting it to the ground. Close by there are the foundation stones of a circular, hive-shaped sweat lodge. Along with a sunken room, like a stone-lined root cellar where the priest would hide if unwanted onlookers were spotted. And there even used to be tunnels running the mile or so from grounds of the local chapel, all filled in by farmers now.

I had the wonderful privilege of being home in Ireland for its 400-year anniversary service. Where hundreds of folks, protestants and catholic, trudged through the boggy fields of my father’s land in rubber boots and their Sunday best hidden under waterproof layers. To huddle together along a dirt track that only a tractor could navigate now. Standing on grassy mounds, and stone walls, pulling out folding chairs, and sitting on the limbs of trees and on the hedge row. The priest passed out the order of service, and sheet with familiar hymn lyrics, as the cold rain started to fall. We sang Amazing Grace, Be Thou My Vision, How Great Thou Art.

And as the wind whipped in, and the rain calmed to a drizzle, it wasn’t lost to me that we were rehearsing a gathering that folks did centuries before, risking their very lives, no doubt believing that what they suffered because of religious persecution was in fact worth it. Worth it because there was something about their experience that connected them to the spiritual, to Christ even, to something eternal, something that could never be destroy.

RE-INTERPRETING TEXT

Now, our biblical author made a decision to connect the shared experience of suffering to give desperate and fearful people hope that what they were enduring was worth it. I can only surmise that this approach worked for his time and place, maybe even for those Catholic believers for the 16th-century meeting in holes and hedgerows, because we stand here today in receipt of the faith that (at least) some survived to pass on. However, I want to interpret this text and this logic responsibly for today and for us and our world and context.

So, I am making the decision to connect (not the shared experience of suffering) but of resilience. For, as I stood on the same turf as my ancestors did, I didn’t sense their fear and I wasn’t overcome with their suffering (which they of course experienced, I was consumed by their convictions, their resilience, and their holy defiance to unjust laws. That was the overwhelming connection to the live and ministry of Christ that I felt in every fiber of my being. Yes, Christ suffered and yes those who have followed the Jesus-Way have suffered, but that is not, at least for me, what garners and holds the most meaning for me today, what spurs me on to hope in a hopeless world.

For me, the logic of First Peter actually anticipates that an abused person or enslaved person can somehow submerge their present pain in the anticipation of sharing the glory of Jesus’s resurrected body. So, what can happen when we presume that suffering proves the authenticity of an individual’s faith, is that we minimize the agony and distress experienced by ourselves and others. And instead of providing meaning and encouragement and strength it justifies the perpetuation of suffering and abuse. So, I reject that, in favor of declaring that it is in your ability to simply show up, live with joy, seek out justice and defy the forces of oppression that you step into the power of Christ. Not “by his wounds you have been healed,” though that may also hold truth, but “by his resilience you have been healed,” “by his commitment to justice you have been healed,” “by his very existence you have been healed,” and “by his resurrection you can have hope for tomorrow.”

And since we are in a season where we are focusing on the church and its legacy it is crucially important that we are explicit and honest about how the church (both institutionally) and its pastors and folk in Christian leadership, have been the perpetuators of horrific violence and suffering, justifying their actions using passages like this that glorify suffering and abuse. So, today we call that out, confessing and lamenting the legacy of hurt that we have been complicit in. [PAUSE] Church hurt, church trauma is a real thing in our world, particularly for women, for children, and for LGBTQIA people. And rather than being a source of hope, and a refuge for the vulnerable we have protected those in authority instead.

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So, this passage reminds me of all that our ancestors endured so that I can stand in front of you today, not because of their suffering, but because of their strength and resilience. This passage connects me and you to Christ, not in the mutual suffering alone, but in mutual hope and to Christ’s resurrection not just his death.

CONCLUSION

This passage, as I hope it does for you, spurs me on to renew my commitment to honesty and safety, and justice and healing. This is the part of the Christ vision, the Kingdom vision that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus still informs and inspires in this place. As our “Affirmation of Faith” declares “Holy Wisdom of God, firstborn of creation, you emptied yourself of power, and became foolishness for our sake. You labored with us upon the cross and have brought us forth to the hope of resurrection. We commit ourselves to struggle against evil, and to choose life.”

And so, hear me today when I say that you’re suffering and how you endure or experience your suffering DOES NOT somehow prove or demonstrate the authenticity or strength of your faith, instead your commitment to your wholeness and joy does. And that is our collective holy quest as a church here in Louisville in 2023!

May we walk in the Justice-Seeking Way of Jesus,

May our church be a Community of Boundless Love,

May we become people who bring Hope and Wholeness wherever we go. Amen.