



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Refined by Fire

1 Peter 1:3-9

This morning I am beginning a series of sermons on the book we know as First Peter. Actually, First Peter is not a book, but it is a sermon. Some folks talk about First Peter as a letter, and it was. It was a letter written to Christians who were referred to as exiles in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. But the book we know as First Peter was much more than a letter to these Christians, it was a sermon and, specifically, a baptism sermon.

It is an appropriate text for today, for in many churches, this particular Sunday that immediately follows Epiphany is known as Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

Tradition tells us, as well as most people who live in the theologically academic world of our seminaries, that Simon Peter the fisherman and disciple of Jesus wrote the book of First Peter. So imagine that we have preserved for us a sermon in letter form that was most likely composed in its original form by Peter with the help of his friend Silas.

Some have argued that a dumb fisherman like Peter could not have written a letter of such eloquence; thus Peter must have leaned heavily on Silas for editing. If this is true, then I can certainly identify, for everything I write needs to be reviewed by an editor before it is suitable for publication.

In the letter before us, Peter actually mentioned that he wrote with the help of Silas. But to say that Peter could not have written this because he was a fisherman might be a little offensive to some of you who consider yourselves fishermen (and women).

To better understand the context of this letter we need to know that Peter was not writing to a church that was centered in the Jewish world, in and around Israel, but Peter wrote to a young church that worshipped and evangelized in a place that was dominated by Roman power and culture.

The emperor Nero sat on the throne. Nero was the one who tradition tells us played his violin as he watched the city of Rome burn. Historians suggest that

Nero ordered the city to be burned so he could build a new and more glorious Rome, but he placed the blame for the burning of Rome on this new sect of people who called themselves Christians.

Our early brothers and sisters in Christ, who first received this letter from Peter, were the scapegoats, and were being hunted down for atrocities of which they were innocent.

It was easy to blame the Christians, for there were all sorts of rumors springing up all over the place. You can hear the conversation in the Roman version of Java Jacks:

“Hey, Joe, I saw some of those strange Christians yesterday.”

“I’ve seen them around town. You know they are atheists.”

“You don’t mean it.”

“Yeah, they’re atheists. Oh, they may believe in one God, but they discount all the others.”

“I heard they are cannibals, and they actually practice cannibalism during their gatherings.”

“You have to be kidding.”

“No, I mean it, cannibals; they eat flesh and drink blood.”

“Nero says they set fire to Rome.”

“Well, if they are cannibalistic atheists, I guess they might be arsonists as well.”

With the hardships caused when Rome burned in the first century, and with the fires blamed on Christians, you can see one reason it became illegal to be associated with Christians, and a wave of persecution spread from Rome throughout the empire, and much of it is so horrible that no one wants to hear the details. It was during these years of persecution that tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul was executed in Rome. His head was cut off.

Shortly after Paul’s death, Peter was arrested in Rome and once again the tradition informs us that orders were given to have Peter crucified.

Paul was a Roman citizen; thus he could not be crucified. His death had to be accomplished in a so-called merciful way.

But Peter was not a citizen and thus there was no law that would keep him from dying a horrible death. And you know the story: Peter, feeling unworthy to die in the manner Jesus died, requested that his body be placed upside down on his cross.

When Peter put the pen to paper, he wrote about Christian hope in times of suffering, and he did this by writing a baptism sermon. You see, we have hope because we have been claimed by God, and our hope is an eternal inheritance kept in heaven.

The hope of heaven is a glorious thought, but it has been twisted by tyrants into a very dangerous theme. I know we often get warm feelings and goose bumps when we see a child baptized in our church. Things seem so right, a beautiful child, smiling parents and grandparents, wonderful hymns, a climate controlled room, the church is adding a member, and hope abounds in the claim of God upon us. It is a dangerous theme.

One reason it is dangerous is that the theme that you belong to God, and even in your suffering you have the sure hope of heaven, God's wonderful and eternal presence, is not legitimate. It is an abused theme, for there are some who used it to keep the slaves down on the plantation. Get them believing that if they are good, if they work hard in the cotton fields, if they work as though they are serving Jesus, they will go to heaven. There is a reward waiting for them. They may not realize it in this life, but it's there. How else do you make them content out there in the cotton fields making the master rich off the sweat of their brow? Because in the end God will make things right.

What were some of the songs they sang?

Deep river,

My home is over Jordan.

Deep river, Lord,

I want to cross over into campground.

Then there is:

Mother, is master going to sell us tomorrow?

/ Yes, yes, yes! / O, watch and pray

Going to sell us in Georgia?

/ Yes, yes, yes! / O, watch and pray
Farewell; mother, I must leave you

/ Yes, yes, yes! / O, watch and pray
Mother, don't grieve after me

/ No, no, no! / O, watch and pray
Mother, I'll meet you in heaven

/ Yes, my child! / O, watch and pray

Wasn't it Karl Marx who said, "Religion is the opiate of the people?" People suffering on the plantation, or other economic or political bondage of the rich, can get them believing that if they are good, if they are peacemakers as Jesus commanded, if they are meek and go about their work, making the masters richer, if they will work as though they are serving Jesus Christ they will go to heaven. None of this rebellion; endure today's troubles because things will be better in the life to come. You see the idea of baptism, of being claimed by God, if left to the interpretation of greedy humans can be most dangerous.

Our text for today is First Peter 1:3-9. Though Peter does not use the word "baptism" until the third chapter, this is basically the opening of his baptism sermon. Hear the word of God:

³ 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, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ 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. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Can you hear the language of baptism in this text? In God's great mercy, through Jesus Christ we have a new birth and sin is dealt with. Now there is resurrection, resurrection from the dead, and we who are claimed in baptism have a new home, an inheritance that can never be taken from us. This is our greatest

hope, for as each day passes, we know that our mortality is catching up with us, so thank God we are baptized, we are claimed by God.

However, Peter was dealing with a different type of mortality than stiffening joints and clogged arteries. Peter had to deal with Nero. Suffering will come; there will be all kinds of trials. Because of your faith in Jesus Christ, you may lose your property, your job, and maybe your life. So Peter reminded the faithful of their baptism, they were claimed by Jesus Christ, and those who endured would have a refined faith, a pure faith, a faith stripped of external security, a faith that looked only to Jesus Christ for comfort and for guidance. Such a faith honors God, and God, who is faithful, will receive us into his eternal presence.

Of course, in the hands of plantation masters, tyrants and dictators, this language has been inappropriately used to keep the eyes of the oppressed on heaven's goal while they suffer here on earth. There are those who convince the masses they are appointed by God to rule and thus justify their lavish lifestyles while God's people go hungry. They use their power and the ignorance of the poor to sustain their lies. Marx was partly right.

But the Christian faith is not one that settles for injustice. When some, due to the circumstances of their birth, are given privilege and other hard working folks are held back, or forced to serve the privileged, the Church has to do something about it. The goal of Christian hope is not to make us content with servitude and injustice, Christian hope frees us to fight for what is right, fight for others, and make this world a place where everyone has the hope of improving their position. Maybe this is why we live in such a great nation, for we understand that all people are created equal, all people have rights, and all people should have opportunities which are not to be denied because of race, sex, circumstance, orientation or creed.

We understand that Jesus came "to proclaim good news to the poor. He came to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That is how Jesus interpreted his coming in Luke, and for this reason we cannot interpret our baptism or anyone else's baptism as a shackle that allows anyone to be oppressed during this life while they wait for Christ's coming.

Our baptism is a comfort in sorrow, it is a strength in tribulation, but most important it is our confidence to serve Jesus Christ right now.

In the text Peter has to address the topic of suffering. And I certainly hope that we never have to face the likes of Nero, and the horrendous persecutions he

brought upon the church. And, of course, there are brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer because of their faith. But whether or not our suffering comes from Nero, or someplace else, we will all suffer.

I see the suffering in the eyes of a dear friend who sits at the table filled with casseroles, meat plates, all types of vegetables, cakes, and pies -- food brought in to comfort, but he cannot eat any of it for he is about to bury his wife, or even worse, his child. In the face of this, I am not qualified to deliver a sermon on suffering and anguish.

I mean, Peter is speaking about suffering that is so intense that it can challenge your faith, and it can even destroy faith. So Peter reminds us that we are baptized, and that there will come a day when we will inherit the Kingdom of God. And if we can keep the faith, our faith will grow stronger.

I have not suffered much, so I am uncomfortable preaching on the subject, but we are told in Scripture that one thing we can do in our suffering is to identify with the suffering of Jesus. And Jesus was clear with those who followed him: "Don't expect to be immune. If they have done it to your Master, they will do it to you." Jesus was humiliated. He was misunderstood. He was betrayed. He was rejected. He was tempted. And he was crucified.

If we are able to understand the nature of suffering and how it can happen to us, we would do well to measure our suffering by the suffering of Jesus and realize that because he endured, we have within us his strength to also endure.

G.A. Studdert Kennedy wrote, "The modern cult of cheeriness is largely due to the fact that we are deathly afraid of being sad. We want Easter without Lent. Be we cannot have it." The two, Lent and Easter, come as a pair.

We can endure suffering because of the hope of the resurrection. Our questions about suffering may never be answered, but our life is by faith. What did Thomas say? "Lord, where else can we go, for only you have the words of eternal life?"

Of course, in response to Karl Marx, one should never use religion as a fatalistic understanding that we have to simply endure our lot in life, or that the poor have to endure this life in the hope of a better life in the hereafter. Our faith calls us to set the oppressed free, not to try and make them feel better about their poverty.

Horatio Spafford lost his business in the Chicago fire of 1871. His family planned a trip to London and because of business the Spaffords sent their four

daughters ahead of them. As Horatio and his wife prepared to leave on their ship, they got word that the ship carrying their four daughters floundered and all four were lost at sea. We are told that on his trip across the ocean, at the spot where his daughters perished he wrote the words we sang earlier, “When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll: whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.”

How could he do that? He was heartbroken, in extreme grief, it was only by his faith in God, and, yes, the two go hand in hand.

I find it helpful yet difficult to understand that faith grows during times of adversity and suffering, though I do not think it is helpful to tell someone like Horatio Spafford that the reason he suffered was to refine his faith. Suffering is what we oppose, it is what God opposes, yet it can be used in our quest for a deeper faith. I mean, if it would take the loss of my children to grow in faith, then it would be infinitely better for me to stay weak in faith.

There is no purpose for suffering, but its effects can do one of two things. Suffering will either devastate our faith or be used to strengthen it. The difference comes in your preparation for suffering. Now is the time to build a relationship with Jesus Christ, now is the time to rejoice in our hope, now is the time to understand our dependence on Christ, for if we wait for the storm to hit it will be too late.

Peter put it this way, **“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”**

Malcolm Muggerage, in the “Twentieth Century Testimony,” said, “Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world – everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence – has been through affliction, and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo, the result would not be to make life delectable but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else that has called me inexorably to Christ.”

Yes, suffering is a creative crucible by which our faith is purified and by which we can come to a greater awareness of the love and power of God.

So finally, I say, “Outlast it!” Out last it! Hang on! And see how God will work this evil we call suffering out for our good and for His glory, for God can even use suffering for his purpose. Amen.