

**Palm Sunday
March 16, 2008**

Title: Anticipatory Pain and Suffering

Text: I Peter 4:12-19

Thesis: Christians may experience pain and suffering just because we are Christians.

The Series:

This is the sixth message in a Lenten Series: Knowing Christ through Pain and Suffering.

The Apostle Paul wrote, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead. Philippians 3:10-11

Introduction

When I go to a doctor, I want to know everything. I want to know what has to be done and if the doctor can do it. I want to know if it is going to hurt and if so, how much? I want to know the risks. I want to know the prognosis for complete recovery. I want to know if it is going to be covered by insurance. I want to know if the doctor has ever done this before and if he or she is any good at it.

If I have surgery, I don't want any surprises. I do not want to hear the surgeon say anything like, "Oops!" or "Wait a minute, if this is his appendix, what is that thing I just removed?" or worst of all, "We had better save that for the autopsy."

However, I am willing to entrust myself to the care of a medical professional, whom I trust. I am willing to anticipate and experience additional pain and suffering if there is hope of recovery and wholeness following a procedure.

Jesus anticipated his own pain and suffering. In Luke 22:21, as he sat at the table with his disciples, enacting what we now call the Last Supper, he said, "Here at this table, sitting among us as a friend, is the man who will betray me. For I, the Son of Man, must die since it is part of God's plan." Later that same night in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering from me." A few days earlier, the day we mark as Palm Sunday, as Jesus was about to make his triumphal entry, he looked out over the city of Jerusalem and began to weep for those who had rejected their opportunity of God's grace.

Jesus also anticipated our pain and suffering. In John 16:33 Jesus said to his followers, “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

In some ways it is unnerving to know that pain and suffering loom on the horizon... anticipating pain and suffering can be as painful, if not more so, than the actual experience of pain and suffering. Some temperaments may prefer to be kept in the dark about whatever may be in the wind. Others of us prefer to know, up front, what we can expect. We do not like surprises. We want to approach life with our eyes wide open. While some may be paralyzed by the inevitability of pain and suffering, others seize the opportunity to prepare for it.

In our text today, Peter gives the followers of Jesus Christ guidance as to how Christians may anticipate experiences of pain and suffering.

The first thing we are told is, “Don’t be shocked by it.”

I. There is no shock in experiencing pain and suffering.

- Dear friends, don’t be surprised at the painful trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. I Peter 4:12**

There are two instructive truths that may be lifted from this verse.

A. Pain and suffering is an expected part of the Christian experience.

We are not to be surprised by it. Pain and suffering is not to be thought strange or foreign to the Christian experience. In fact, if we link these comments with those made in I Peter 1:6-7, trials are necessary for the refining and perfecting of personal faith, which only when under fire, may be shown to be strong and pure.

B. Pain and suffering in the Christian experience will be intense.

The second instructive truth in this verse is that the trials may be very intense. The word used to describe the trials is “painful.” In the original language, the word is “pyrosis” which we immediately associate with pyromania, an irresistible desire to start fires. The word means to burn and may be more accurately translated “fiery trials.”

We have something of an understanding of the pain that results from a burn. We know that 1st degree burns are relatively mild and affect only the epidermis or outer layer of skin. 2nd degree burns are more serious and

affect the epidermis and the dermis, which is the lower layer of skin. 2nd degree burns result in pain, redness, swelling, and blistering. 3rd degree burns are the most serious because they affect the epidermis, the dermis, and the deeper tissue beneath. It is common knowledge that 3rd degree burns are the most difficult type of pain and suffering to treat and relieve.

Synonyms for fiery trials would include words like crucibles, ordeals, tribulations, and afflictions... anything that severely tests the resiliency of one's faith and character, anything that is difficult to treat and relieve.

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/trial+by+fire>)

During one of the most horrific of historic periods in our history, Abraham Lincoln said, "The fiery trials through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation." (<http://www.quotecosmos.com>)

We are told in scripture that we can be certain that there will be periods of pain and suffering that may be described as fiery in nature. So pain ought not shock us and neither should it shame us.

II. There is no shame in experiencing pain and suffering.

- Instead, be very glad because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering, and afterward you will have the wonderful joy of sharing his glory when it is displayed to all the world. Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian... I Peter 4:13-14

Jesus held up the reward of heaven as sufficient cause of joy in the midst of pain and suffering. In the Beatitudes, he told his followers, "God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven." Matthew 5:11-12

Peter gives us three reasons why we may "be glad" or "have wonderful joy" when we go through fiery trials.

- A. Through pain and suffering we partner with Christ in his suffering.
- B. Through pain and suffering we will share Christ's glory.
- C. Through pain and suffering we will be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The central idea running through this verse is that there is honor in being identified with Jesus Christ. It is an honor to share in his suffering. It will be an honor to be aligned with Christ when he comes in glory. And between now and then, it is an honor to find strength in the Holy Spirit as we experience our present fiery trials.

People commonly disassociate and distance ourselves from those who might tarnish our reputations. During this election year, politicians from both sides of the aisle have frequently evoked Ronald Reagan's name because they wish to be associated with Ronald Reagan. Until John McCain received President Bush's endorsement of his candidacy, no one was going out of their way to align themselves with an unpopular president and his policies. The Clinton camp was quick to distance itself from the comments of Geraldine Ferro and the Obama camp was quick to distance itself from the rhetoric of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

Last fall 85-year-old Paul Henss was arrested in suburban Atlanta, Georgia by the United States Justice Department. In 1934 he had joined the Hitler Youth organization and in 1940 he joined the Nazi Party. During the war he served in the elite Waffin SS as a guard and attack dog handler at the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps. When he came to the United States in 1955 he went to great lengths to conceal his concentration camp service... he was not proud of his association with The Third Reich. In fact he concealed truth, distancing himself from Hitler by one continent and some sixty-six years of time before he was discovered.

In contrast, on Memorial Day, veterans proudly don their uniforms and join the ranks of their brothers and sisters in arms remembering those who have died in the service of their country. They are honored to be among the ranks of American veterans. In our text, Peter tells us that it is our honor, as Christians, to join the ranks of those who have gone before us and who walk with us as fellow followers of Jesus Christ.

However, not all pain and suffering is honorable.

III. There is no honor in experiencing deserved pain and suffering.

- If you suffer however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his wonderful name! I Peter 4:15-16

In these verses Peter contrasts the suffering of a person who is living a non-Christian lifestyle and the suffering of a person who is living a Christian lifestyle. When someone suffers because he or she is a murderer, a thief, a troublemaker, or a busybody, that person cannot legitimately liken his or her suffering to that of Jesus Christ. Christ was an innocent sufferer.

A. Some suffering is consequential suffering.

Sometimes God is gracious and does not punish us for all our sins or deal with us, as we might deserve. (Psalm 103:10) But as a general rule, we experience the natural consequences of our actions. In Galatians 6:7 we are warned, “Don’t be misled. Remember you cannot ignore God and get away with it. You will always reap what you sow!”

Eliot Spitzer has been the object of considerable controversy during his time as Attorney General and more recently as Governor of the state of New York. Newsweek Magazine writer, Howard Fineman described him as “a man loaded with too much rocket fuel” who blew up on the launch pad. (<http://www.newsweek.com/id/120366>)

His wife and daughters do not deserve their pain and suffering... they are the innocents in this story who are suffering because of the behavior of someone they love. But Eliot Spitzer dare not think of himself as any kind of martyr who is being unfairly held accountable for his actions or his hypocrisy.

There is also the teaching from Hebrews 12:5-13 reminding us that “the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes those he accepts as his children... no discipline is enjoyable while it is happening – it is painful! But afterward there will be a quiet harvest of right living by those who are trained in this way.”

If a Christian is to suffer, let it be because he or she is a gracious and good person.

B. Some suffering is honorable.

Peter wrote, “Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world.” I Peter 2:12

We are instructed to live exemplary lives in this world. We are to live in such a way as to not attract negative attention. In II Peter 3:14 he wrote, “Dear friends... make every effort to live a pure and blameless life. And be at peace with God.”

Paul said Colossians 3:17, “Whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks to the Father.” A few verses later he wrote, “Live wisely among those who are not Christians, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and effective so you will have the right answer for everyone.” Colossians 4:5

If you are going to suffer for anything, let it be because you are living a Christ like lifestyle.

In 2002, Ron Brown, a University of Nebraska Assistant Football Coach, was denied the head-coaching position at Stanford University. Brown, who coached under Tom Osborne, is a devout Christian who is outspoken about his convictions, including the practice of homosexuality as sinful. A Stanford Assistant Athletic Director said, “[His religion] was definitely something that had to be considered... we are a very diverse community with a diverse alumni.”

Brown admittedly was shocked by the school’s candor. He said, “If I had been discriminated against for being black, they would never had told me that, but they had not problem telling me it was because of my Christian beliefs.” (Ted Olsen, "Diversity, Except For...", Men of Integrity (January/February 2005)

On Friday Chaldean Christians gathered in northern Iraq near Mosul to mark the death of martyred Archbishop Rahho. At his funeral the patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic church, Emmanuel III Delly, tearfully urged Christians not to seek revenge for the death of the archbishop of Mosul, whose body was found in a shallow grave two weeks after being kidnapped. The 80-year-old cardinal, who broke down and wept, told throngs of mourners at the funeral that they are obliged to follow a path of peace. (<http://www.apfgoogle.com>, March 14, 2008)

This week Voice of the Martyrs reported that Christians were attacked in Muslim dominated areas of Ethiopia where radical Islamists are determined to rid the area of what they call “the shame of Christianity.” (<http://www.persecutionblog.com>, Believers Murdered by Muslims in Ethiopia, March 14, 2008)

The bible reminds the followers of Christ, “If you suffer however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people’s affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his wonderful name! “

When a Christian anticipates the likelihood of pain and suffering... even persecution for one’s faith, the follower of Christ goes into it determined to persevere through it.

IV. There is reason to persevere when pain and suffering are according to God’s will.

- The time has come for judgment, and it must begin first among God’s own children. And if ever we must be judged, what terrible fate awaits those who have never believed God’s Good News? So if you**

are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is right, and trust God who made you, for he will never fail you.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul encouraged his Christian friends to “never give up.” He wrote, “Our present day troubles are quite small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurable great glory that will last forever! So do not look at the troubles we can see right now; rather look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.” II Corinthians 4:16-18

In 1984, Bonnie and I moved to southern California where we served a church in Fullerton for a few years. While living there we thoroughly enjoyed the varied landscape of the area. One day when I was “feeling my Wheaties”, I drove down to Joshua Tree National Park. I parked my car at Cottonwood Springs and set off on a four mile hike that took me through rocky canyons, across flat open desert, into dry washes, and past huge rock formations to a narrow ridge that overlooked a deep ravine... far below I could see what is called t Lost Palm Oasis. There were over 100 California Fan Palms in a grove along a desert stream that ran through the canyon. I decided that having come this far I might as well see it up close, so I climbed down into the canyon and walked into the grove of palms. It was cool, serene, and beautiful. I found a rock, sat down and ate my lunch. Along the stream, I saw the tracks of desert dwelling critters and creatures that come down from the rugged mountain peaks, the blazing heat of the surrounding desert, and out from under rocks to be refreshed. I lingered there for quite sometime before I climbed out and made my way back.

Our lives may be likened to a hike through a desert, which has a fair amount of heat..., but when you get to the end of the trail, there is a beautiful oasis. We walk the four miles of life to get a glimpse of what we cannot yet see.

That is why Peter encourages us in our text to:

A. Keep on doing what is right.

B. Keep on trusting God.

Banks have not always been as plentiful as they are in our culture. In bible times, there was not a bank on every corner where they could deposit their money for safekeeping in an interest bearing account or money market investment program. There was no FDIC to insure that even if the bank folded... your money would be insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. So you had to hide your money or in your absence, entrust it to a friend. Barclay says, “Such a trust was regarded as one of the most

sacred things in life. The friend was absolutely bound by all honor and all religion to return the money intact.” (William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, P. 310)

It is with this same surety that Jesus Christ, at the point of death prayed, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” You may be more familiar with the phraseology, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” At a graveside committal service we say, “Father, in that you have seen fit to take from us the life of our loved one, we commit his body to this earthly resting place until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we commend his spirit to you, a just and merciful God.”

It is with this same surety that we entrust ourselves to God for safekeeping when we anticipate times of pain and suffering.

Conclusion

On the first of March one hundred dog teams and their mushers left Anchorage to the cheering of crowds as they began the Iditarod race this year. They raced for 1,150 miles of extreme landscapes, both beautiful and frighteningly treacherous... mountain ranges, frozen rivers, dense forests, desolate tundra, and windswept coastline toward Nome, Alaska and the Bering Sea. They were hot and they were cold. They were exhausted by the relentless pressing on, the endless drive, physical exertion, and strategizing, on and on toward the finish line. This year Lance Mackey finished the race with eleven dogs in 9 days, 11 hours, 46 minutes and 48 seconds early Wednesday morning at around 3 a.m., to cheering crowds who lined the main street of Nome. (<http://iditarodblogs.com/news/2008/03/12>)

Lance Mackey had not disillusionments about what lay before him when he left Anchorage but whatever hardship lay before him, was worth the glory that would be his in Nome.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, as the crowds cheered and devotees strewed the roadway with garments, palm branches and flowers; Jesus fully anticipated that in the week before him, he would be deserted and denied by his friends, rejected by the people he came to seek and to save, accused by his enemies, abused and crucified by his tormentors. But he also knew about Easter morning. And so we too, look through pain and suffering with anticipation, because on the other side of it, is Easter. Amen.