

An Inspiring View

6th Sun. of Easter – 05/14/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 14-15a, [Literal translation from the Greek,] **“But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. Do not be afraid of them, nor be troubled, but make holy the Lord Christ in your hearts...”**.

Introduction

- ✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*
- ✘ Alex Honnold is known for free-solo rock climbing; that is rock climbing without any ropes or protective equipment. In 2017 he became the first person to free solo the famous granite wall known as El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. It's easy to find a picture of him online climbing a rugged cliff, suspended high above the ground. What's interesting about these pictures is the obvious contrast between his struggle in climbing the rock and the inspiration of the setting.
 - ➔ When you focus in on Alex, with only his hands and feet holding him to the stone, you see his body leaning into the rock; his hands lodged in a crevice and his face against the stone.
 - ➔ But looking at the setting, you see what inspired him to do this; the vast expanse of rock jutting up into the sky; the beautiful expanse of clouds above him and the deep and varied landscape below him.
- ✘ Zooming in, only on the man, you see extreme tension; an intense struggle. But zooming out to the much larger world around him, we realize that his is a very limited experience as a part of a much greater, beautiful creation that inspires awe in the eye of the beholder.
 - ➔ While Alex Honnold is not a Christian, Peter shows us that his experience is similar to that of Christians. Christian discipleship is difficult. Its struggle is intense so that often we find ourselves fixated in upon the difficulty of discipleship; with our face pressed against the wall, to the point that we can miss out on God's far grander vision intended to inspire and carry us forward.
- ✘ Peter wrote this letter to the newly converted Christians in various cultural settings: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1), hoping to offer them an inspiring view. Even though they belong to different churches in different cultures, they have one thing in common among them. They are all struggling. They're all having difficulty living out their lives as Christ's followers.
 - ➔ They're struggle, you see, is trying to figure out how their faith interacts with the very different world around them. So Peter writes this letter with the goal of offering them a larger vision of God's glorious work in Christ in order to inspire them and help them endure their struggles while still remaining faithful to the Lord.
 - ➔ May Peter's words this morning likewise help, inspire and equip each one of us with a greater confidence in Christ, so that we too can endure the many difficulties that we face in our Christian discipleship.

I. Our difficulty in discipleship

- ✘ It's pretty common for people – including Christians, to think of the suffering in our lives as an indication that something is wrong. Bill and Janel, for example were having trouble with their friends. They had been part of the same group of families for years. Their kids grew up doing lots of activities together; things like scouting, soccer, baseball, basketball and volleyball. They celebrated high school and college graduations, weddings, and the birth of grandchildren

throughout the years. But now, after all of that, it seems like things have changed. Now everything has become political.

→ Events in the news are now causing arguments. Bill and Janel try to explain their reactions as Christians, but their commitment to Christ is now putting a strain on their friendships. So they've begun to wonder, "Should we just keep our faith to ourselves." "I must be doing something wrong," Bill once said. "I feel like having friends that you can be honest with should not be this hard." On top of that, some of their own children are now pulling away from Christ for the same reason, because they just don't want the "hassle" of believing in things that "no longer line up with what their friends now believe".

✘ But you see, though it might seem new to us, this same struggle is thousands of years old. Remaining faithful to Christ and His perfect Word of truth in the midst of friends and others who do not agree or who want to be contentious is hard, and it always has been hard.

→ When Jesus called us to follow Him, He called us in Matthew 10:38 to take up our cross. Discipleship is not easy. Not now. Not ever. Satan tempts us to think that, because it's hard we are doing something wrong; that the Christian life should be easy. And if it's not, then he convinces us that the best thing to do is just be quiet about our faith. St. Peter though offers us a different vision. He encourages us in verse 15 to "always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect". Why? Because we know and we have the power of God that is ours in Jesus Christ.

✘ Thanks be to God, Peter offers us a way of dealing with the difficulties and struggles that come with following Jesus. Surprise – he encourages us to look away from our own struggles and look instead to Jesus.

II. An inspiring view of Christ

✘ When we think about the disciple Peter, we often think of what he did. We remember his spontaneity; how he wanted to walk on water; how he wanted to build booths on the Mount of Transfiguration; how he claimed he would follow Jesus into death; how he denied Jesus in the courtyard; how he preached of Jesus on Pentecost. So because of Peter's rich and varied life, we might think Peter would be a good source for advice on Christian discipleship.

→ But that's not what Peter offers to us here in his letter. Instead, he turns our eyes away from ourselves; away from himself, to consider what he saw in Jesus for inspiration. At the end of his letter, in chapter 5:1 Peter writes, "I exhort the [pastors] among you, as a fellow [pastor] and witness of the sufferings of Christ." Peter does not want us remembering what he said and did, but instead he wants us to take most seriously what he witnessed firsthand – the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

✘ It's there in Jesus that Peter saw how the one true God entered into suffering and triumphed over it. It's there that we see how God is able to use suffering in His kingdom; to know that suffering is in fact not insurmountable for God.

→ Peter writes to the new Christians of his day who are suffering in their discipleship, and reminds them that God actually works salvation through extreme suffering. He says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God" (v.18). It is only through Christ's sufferings that sinners are brought to God. Without His suffering, you and I would still be lost; condemned in our sins; separated eternally from God because of what we say, think, and do. But because of the sufferings of Christ; because of His death on the cross, God's wrath has been appeased. The Righteous One, Jesus, has died for the unrighteous, you and me, so that we might be members of the kingdom of God.

- ✘ Jesus took on suffering and struggled so much more than any of us will ever be able to imagine with the power of sin, death, and the devil, and He did not give up in His faithfulness to the Father; in His love you and me.
 - ➔ Jesus died so that you and I might be saved, and He rose from the dead so that we might be confident that nothing; nothing at all can separate us from God's love and nothing at all can overcome God's constant work in this world.
 - ➔ Although our struggles to follow Christ may be difficult, friends, we can endure them all because we are confident that God works in them for our good just as He worked through the suffering of His Son to bring about His salvation for all mankind.
 - ➔ So what does this mean for us? It means we do not need to be afraid or back down from Jesus in difficult situations, but instead we follow our Savior with the confidence of His power at work in us and for us.

III. Our confidence to endure

- ✘ Albrecht Altdorfer was a painter working in Germany at the same time as Martin Luther. He was known for his ability to paint biblical scenes in the midst of vivid landscapes. In his work, for example, you'll see Jesus and His disciples in moments of suffering, while around them, there is a much larger landscape of vivid colors. Altdorfer's work showed how suffering for the faith always occurs within a much larger vision of God's work within this world.
 - ➔ In one painting, which we've copied on the pink insert in your bulletin today, Altdorfer depicts Jesus praying in Gethsemane. Sadly, in the non-color copy, we've given you, you miss the vivid colors of the original. In the painting though, you see the disciples in the foreground. Peter, James, and John are asleep. Peter rests on a rock, with his back to the scene. John is asleep on his back. James is looking downward. Behind them, in the center of the painting, is Jesus, kneeling before the face of a cliff as an angel brings Him the cup of suffering that He will soon drink.
 - ➔ Finally, much further in the distance, behind Jesus, we see a delegation, coming out of a background lit with the fires of hell. Judas is leading the religious leaders and the temple guard as they come to arrest Jesus.
- ✘ What's amazing about this painting is the important lesson that the arrangement of the figures teaches us. The disciples are obviously defenseless, having fallen asleep. John is actually lying on his back, facing those who are coming to arrest Jesus, his entire body left wide open to attack. And yet, kneeling between the disciples and the forces of darkness is Jesus. His prayer and His presence is their defense. His willingness to bear the cup of God's wrath is their salvation; the very power of the Son of God that protects His people still today.
 - ➔ Yes, because Jesus stands between the disciples and the forces of darkness, nothing will be able to come at them that has not first come through Jesus. And we now know that Jesus is the Victor! He has triumphed over all evil in His death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. So any and all suffering that comes to us has already been conquered and dealt with by Him.
- ✘ Peter gives us a glimpse of this glory of God here in his letter before us today. He relates to the early Christians how Jesus not only suffered for their sin, but how He rose from the dead in victory over all evil for their victory too. Not only that, verse 19 tells us how, when He was already "alive in the Spirit", before His bodily resurrection, Jesus descended into hell itself to proclaim His victory over the souls and the powers of evil. And now this Thursday we celebrate how, 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and is now physically seated at the right hand of God as ruler over all things.

✘ This then is our larger landscape; the larger vision for us to keep in view when we find ourselves struggling and suffering with the difficulties that come at us because we are committed to believing and following Jesus. Whenever our faith is challenged or ridiculed or tested, or our Christian reputation is called into question, Peter encourages us to see this larger vision of our risen and victorious and ruling Lord Jesus.

→ Yes, God calls us every day to see our lives in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

✘ Consider for example Melissa, a college student. She chose not to be quiet about her faith. In a writing class where students were asked to journal their responses to reading assignments, she used her journal to express her faith. It was her honest response to what she read. She reflected on how she, as a Christian, responded to these readings and how her journals have not always been well-received. As Peter directed in verse 16, she has tried to write with “gentleness and respect”, but, in light of and through a number of arguments with other students, she is still learning to do that better.

→ And that’s a crucial lesson for every one of us here today. We must always work to prepare ourselves not to shy away from giving the reason for the certain hope of salvation that we have in Jesus. But if we do not do it “with gentleness and respect”, as Peter says, we only then give those who are challenging our faith more ammunition to “revile” not only us, but our Lord Jesus as well. Peter’s point is this: there is no honor in “suffering” or facing “trouble” as a result your ungodly, unloving, disrespectful response to those who are challenging your faith. For when you respond that way, you only enter into Satan’s trap and fall into sin yourself.

✘ Instead Melissa remembers back at her confirmation, when the pastor “forced her” to get up in front of her parents and others and publically answer questions about her confession of faith. She was so nervous back then. But now all of that seems so simple – talking to other Christians about what you believe. “That’s nothing,” she says, compared to sharing and defending her faith with those in her dorm and classes who do not believe.

→ So now she appreciates the important lesson learned in confirmation; in all those years of Sunday School and the uncomfortable conversations of faith with her parents, because they taught her to do as Peter teaches us today; “to make holy Christ the Lord in her heart” (v.15); the one who first “suffered” (v.18) for her. And to see in her baptism, the power of Jesus saving her yes, but also working inside of her to strengthen her as she gently and respectfully points others to Jesus and His love for them as well.

✘ May this same boldness, confidence, gentleness and respect become a part of your faith’s witness to Jesus today and always, for Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*