

I've never preached on our Epistle lesson before. I've mentioned a couple of the verses before in other sermons. But the whole lesson is a rather difficult one. Nevertheless, I want to dive in to the 3rd chapter of First Peter.

I'll try to be careful—it's easy to get lost in the weeds in this one. But there is also much good news here, and it's especially helpful in our particular season of COVID-19 and social distancing, and worth reflecting on this morning.

The context is this. This Epistle comes from Peter. This could be Simon Peter himself. Or it could be one of his disciples writing in his name after his death. This is one of the places we could get off into the weeds. So we'll just talk about the author as "Peter" and bracket off those other questions about authorship.

In the verses before our lesson, Peter is encouraging his hearers. He's trying to help them face persecution in a Christian way. That theme continues in the first 5 verses of our lesson.

Peter says things like, you are blessed if you suffer for doing the right thing. Don't be fearful, don't be intimidated. And if you're being persecuted, behave with such good conduct that it will shame your abusers. And he sums it all up by saying,

"It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil."¹

Now, what kind of suffering are we talking about? We know from elsewhere in the New Testament, as well as by looking at Christian history. We're talking about Christians being persecuted. Some are beaten. Some are whipped. Some are imprisoned. And some are put to death. And as time goes on, some are put to death in more excruciating ways. In fact the Romans got more cruel and more disgustingly creative as time went on, and I could probably gross most of you out if I went into it in greater detail—so I won't.

And yet Peter is encouraging his hearers to remain hopeful even in the face of difficult suffering and persecution.

Now the parallel is not exact for us. None of us in this country is being put to death for being a Christian. It does happen in other parts of our world, but not here.

But we are facing adversity in the face of the COVID epidemic. And some are facing great suffering. And some are dying. I have had friends contract COVID and recover. But I also have friends who have lost loved ones to COVID.

And I know that many folks are having a difficult time with social distancing and the isolation that brings. Some of you have compared your experiences to being under a type of house-arrest, or being imprisoned. And I know many in our culture are going stir-crazy in the face of social distancing.

¹ 1Peter 3:17

Which reminds me of a statement written about a century after 1Peter. It was from a letter to Christians facing imprisonment, written by the great Christian writer Tertullian.

Tertullian talks about making the best of imprisonment, to use it for your spiritual benefit. He writes:

"The prison does the same service for the Christian which the desert did for the prophet. Our Lord Himself spent much of His time in seclusion, that He might have greater liberty to pray... Let us drop the name of prison; let us call it a place of sanctuary. Though the body is shut in, though the flesh is confined, all things are open to the spirit. In spirit, then, roam abroad; in spirit walk about... (in) the way which leads to God... The leg does not feel the chain when the mind is in the heavens."²

Peter is trying to do the same thing. He is trying to encourage his hearers spiritually in the midst of their suffering and persecution. And then he reminds them of a crucial fact. He says,

"Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."³

Christ also suffered. Jesus knows what you're going through. And Jesus came through his suffering and out the other side again. Therefore there is hope for you too.

And then Peter adds something that's one of the most difficult statements to understand in the New Testament.

He says that Jesus was put to death, but then he was "made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison."⁴

Jesus was killed, but then made alive, and he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.

What the heck is this about? Now I said we could really get lost in the weeds here, and this is the main place. So I'm not going to lay out all the myriad discussions about this one, because they're ALL over the map.

Instead I want to focus on the classical Christian understanding.

Jesus was killed, but then made alive, and he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.

Traditionally this verse is combined with a statement 8 verses later in chapter 4 that was NOT part of our Epistle reading.

² Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, chapter 2

³ 1Peter 3:18

⁴ 1Peter 3:18-19

In chapter 4, Peter says, that Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. And, he continues,

"For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does."⁵

1Peter 3:19 says that Jesus was killed, but then made alive, and he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.

1Peter 4:6 says that the gospel, the good news was proclaimed even to the dead, so that they might live.

OK. What is this about?

The classical understanding is congruent with a statement in the Apostle's Creed. In fact, some scholars have suggested that Peter's church used a proto-form of the Apostle's Creed and that this section of the Epistle is based on the structure of that proto-Creed. But that also gets us off into the weeds.

The Apostle's Creed is used in daily worship, and in Holy Baptism, and at funerals. And in the middle section it states that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again." Or in the older translation, instead of "he descended to the dead" it says, "He descended into hell."

1Peter 3:19 says that Jesus was killed, but then made alive, and he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.

1Peter 4:6 says that the gospel, the good news was proclaimed even to the dead, so that they might live.

What are we talking about? Classically the idea is that Jesus, between his death and resurrection, went to the place of the dead. But he didn't go as just another soul. He was also the Lord of Life. He was the Lord of Heaven and Earth. And he went and brought out of death those who preceded him in death.

In fact, I preached a sermon two years ago about the way that Orthodox Christians picture Easter. And I did a PowerPoint with a number of Orthodox icons of the Resurrection. And when they picture Easter, they don't picture Jesus blasting out of the Tomb. They picture this.

They picture Jesus entering Hell itself. And the Gates of Hell are trampled beneath Jesus' feet. And a personified Death itself lies defeated under his feet.

⁵ 1Peter 4:6

And Jesus is shown reaching out and lifting up Adam and Eve from out of their tombs. And he's also there for King David, and the Prophet Isaiah, and Abraham, and all the great heroes of faith from the Old Testament. He's even there for the New Testament figure, John the Baptist, who preceded him in death.

In other words, Jesus' Resurrection is not just for those who are fortunate enough to live chronologically after 33 AD and everyone else is out of luck. The good news of the Resurrection works both ways in history.

I believe that's what Peter is talking about.

Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead.

And there, as Peter says, he made a proclamation to the spirits in prison. And there, as Peter says, the good news was proclaimed even to the dead, so that they might live.

So, this icon is the way Orthodox Christians picture Easter. But the idea was very popular with Western Christians as well. In fact, it was a popular subject in both visual and performing arts. The oldest English plays extant are centered Jesus' descent into Hell. But this idea has largely fallen off of our Western Christian radar screens.

The word that they used that had great meaning for them was the Harrowing of Hell.

The name came from a harrow, an ancient sort of plow with spikes or tines that broke up the soil and pulled rocks out of it. Just as a harrow lifts the rocks from the soil, Jesus lifts the righteous dead from the grip of the grave and pulls them out of death itself.

The light of Christ shines on those dwelling in darkness and in the shadow of death. The love of Christ brings new life to those who were dead.

As Peter says, the good news was proclaimed even to the dead, so that they might live.

Where do you need the light of Christ in your life? Are there shadowy places you're experiencing during these difficult times?

Where do you need the touch of Christ? Are there nuggets that need to be pulled out and saved out of the soil of your life?

Or as Tertullian says, can you see your captivity as a spiritual gift and opportunity?

Can you use your seclusion to give you more time and greater freedom to pray?

Even if you're feeling constrained and confined physically, can you roam about spiritually? Can you ignore any shackles and set your mind on the things of heaven?

As Peter reminds us, Christ suffered and died to bring us closer to God. And Jesus lives to bring us new life.

"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tomb."⁶

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁶ BCP pp. 483 & 500