

A Saving Baptism

Texts: Mark 1:9-15, I Peter 3:13-22

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John Stott, in *Christian Counter Culture*, writes, “Few men of this century have understood better the inevitability of suffering than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He seems never to have wavered in his Christian antagonism to the Nazi regime, although it meant for him imprisonment, the threat of torture, danger to his own family, and finally death. He was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April 1945, in the Flossenburg concentration camp, only a few days before it was liberated. It was the fulfillment of what he had always believed and taught: ‘Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passiva* suffering because we have to suffer. That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true Church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the Church as the community of those ‘who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel’s sake’...Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer” (From Charles R. Swindoll. The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998. pp. 548-549).

The book of I Peter was written to a church that was struggling with suffering. For you see, those in the time of the early church suffered horrible persecution, including beatings and death because of their faith in Jesus Christ. It had to have been frustrating and scary and uncertain all at the same time. Peter’s words just before our text for today were to give strength and comfort to these people. “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do

not fear their threats; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (I Peter 3:13-15). Peter wants them to understand their suffering in the context of Jesus’ suffering.

The suffering that they are doing does not compare to the suffering Jesus only had to do once for their sakes. Yes, they are being persecuted. Yes, they are suffering. Yes, life is difficult for them. However, it is nothing compared to the kind of suffering that Jesus did on their behalf. Jesus suffered on the cross – His body was beaten and bloodied – because of them. For their unrighteous selves.

We started Lent this past Wednesday – that 40 day journey that leads us to the cross and then the resurrection of Jesus. During this time, we are encouraged and challenged to examine ourselves – to look inside ourselves and see where our hearts are. To see how we have not been faithful to God. “For Christ suffered once for sins.” It was not just the disciples’ sins. Or just the church to which Peter wrote. Or just the Gentiles to whom Paul proclaimed the Good News.

Christ suffered for us. For you. For me. For our sins. As you consider your own walk with Christ and the ways you have let God down, what have you done to contribute to Christ’s suffering? What sins of yours has Christ borne on the cross? What pain has Jesus borne because of our disobedience, our unfaithfulness, our mistakes? It may be painful for us to consider this. However, I believe that is what Lent is for – to examine ourselves. To live into the hope of Christ, yes, but to know why we need that hope.

Because Jesus suffered for a reason for us. “To bring you to God.” God desired that we be reconciled to Him. God desired that we would know Him, serve Him, love

Him with our whole being. And so, Jesus suffered for a divine purpose – for us, to bring us back to God. We could not do it on our own. We could not reach back out to God by ourselves – we needed this intervention on our behalf. Purely out of love. Knowing that, how will your faith and what Christ has done for you bring you closer to God? Return you into God’s loving and caring arms? How will that transform your life – so that you life selflessly and faithfully?

Peter then goes on to relate the story of Noah to the waters of baptism. “And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.” Baptism brings the church in Peter’s day, not a washing away, but an appeal to God, as an intercession, if you will, that if they truly seek their help and hope from God, He will give them a conscience that is gentle and reverent. And this baptism will save them and help them. Just as Jesus was baptized in our Gospel lesson, and then withstood temptation from Satan and began His ministry in Galilee, the church can have the assurance and hope that they are able to withstand any suffering because of Jesus Christ.

This pledge of a clear conscience toward God is for us as well. As the waters of baptism symbolically wash us clean from our sin, Jesus’ death on the cross makes us clean and clear before our God. We can be free from the guilt and the shame of our past mistakes. It no longer has to have a death grip on us. We can let the burden of our sin go because Jesus has taken care of it for us. It is not let go so that we are free to do whatever we want – so that we can sin boldly because, well, Jesus can take care of it for us. Our sin is a serious matter before God. With this release comes repentance and a commitment to a better life before God.

Imagine the possibilities for each of us when we recognize our sin that Jesus bore on the cross to bring us to God – and we now have a clear conscience to live and serve. We are humbled by Christ’s sacrifice – we would then live in humility and gratefulness. In selflessness, giving of ourselves for the sake of Jesus Christ. What could that do for our world, especially amidst the turmoil and chaos – with people judging and hating on one another the way they are.

Things may be difficult for many among us right now, but God has sent Jesus Christ to suffer for our sins once for all. God is our hope and assurance amidst the suffering, the hard times, and the strife that we might face. PHEME PERKINS, Professor of New Testament at Boston College, writes, “As an introduction to the season of Lent, this passage echoes dramatic highlights in the story of salvation. The passion, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ demonstrate God’s triumph over the powers of the universe...As Christians use the time of fasting and penance during Lent to renew their lives, they should remember God’s grace that was given to them in baptism” (Perkins, p. 66). God’s grace – a saving baptism. Repentance, forgiveness, freedom from guilt. Being brought back to God. Let this be your Lent. Let us be ready to more fully live our lives as God desires. Let us pray...

Loving Father, we give You thanks that You loved us so much to send Jesus to the cross. We do not like to think about the suffering He endured – the extreme pain He experienced – all for us. It makes us uncomfortable. But maybe that is the point. We want to be close to You. We want to live lives that are in accordance with Your will. Help us, we pray, to examine our lives so that it leads to repentance and greater faithfulness. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.