

How to Handle Suffering: By Believing I Peter 1:13-21

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While researching the sermon for today, I ran across a web site entitled, "I Used to Believe." Among its entries were these:

- 1.) I used to believe that God was always watching me so I danced around when I brushed my teeth so God would not get bored.
- 2.) I used to believe that God lived in the church, and the reason bad things happened was that God woke up grumpy from sleeping on the hard pews.
- 3.) I used to believe that Communion was served during church because the service was so long that everyone needed a snack.
- 4.) I used to believe that God's name was Howard, because we always pray, 'Our Father who art in heaven, Howard is his name.'

We gather for Confirmation this weekend in the life of this congregation. It is a time to affirm our faith, refine our beliefs, and commit ourselves to a lifetime of discipleship. It is time to say with confidence, "I believe" and to pray that God will "help us when it is hard to believe." As Peter says to early Christians, "Believe in God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and glorified him so that your faith and hope are in God." Let us declare our beliefs.

WE BELIEVE THAT RIGHT IS STRONGER THAN WRONG.

So we call upon people to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of their sin. Or as Peter put it, "prepare your minds for action."

A hundred years ago people were overly optimistic that the 20th century, with its explosion of scientific discovery and belief in human potential, would bring an end to "the troubles of the world."

Last century did give us reason to rejoice. We put people on the moon, learned to drive cars at high speeds, fly airplanes with the greatest of ease. It is hard for us to comprehend a world without a radio, television, the telephone and for you younger people, a computer and video games.

But the 20th century also brought us the Holocaust, nuclear weapons of mass destruction, ethnic cleansing, racism and an AIDS epidemic that has left huge numbers of children in Africa orphans.

Thanks to modern psychology, we are now able to take a long look inside ourselves. But there we discover the spiritual forces of wickedness battling as

fiercely as they do in the star wars struggle of the universe. So what can we believe about the struggles of the world, the one out there and the one in here?

We can believe the words of Jesus who said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We can practice the faith of a Holocaust victim who scribbled on a cellar wall in Cologne, Germany:

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining,

I believe in love, even when I am alone.

I believe in God, even when he is silent.

We can choose to believe that love is stronger than hate; that peace is preferred to war. We can believe that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

WE BELIEVE THAT CHRIST IS THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD.

So we ask people to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and put their whole trust in his grace. Or as Peter puts it, "set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Lewis Smedes once wrote: "Any rational skeptic will remind me that ancient rumors of a Rabbi's resurrection make a thin limb on which to hang the hope of the world. Yes, I admit it is a thin limb. But now, after all these years, it is proven sturdy enough to have held up a sign for all these ages that God the Creator has the competence to redeem the world he made."

Now I must admit that Peter's talk about the redemptive power of the blood of Christ, a Lamb without spot or defect, slain for the forgiveness of my sins, makes no sense at all without an understanding of the sacrificial systems of the Old Testament. It may be outright repulsive to tidy people sitting in antiseptic churches on a spring Sunday morning.

But do not run away from the blood analogy too quickly. Many of you today will give blood as a "gift of life" to someone who needs it. You will never know the recipient's name or even the nature of their need; nevertheless you want to give to help them live.

Let me say as I watched bag after bag of platelets given by this congregation, flow into my blood stream last year, that I gave thanks to God for your gift of life. You were a savior to me. A savior is someone who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So on a spiritual plain, I still like to sing:

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

Jesus is more than a good luck charm. He is more than a rabbit's foot redeemer. He is not someone to dangle from your rear view mirror as you search for a

parking place. Jesus is not a Monty Hall deal-maker. He is no Aladdin genie where our wish is his command. Jesus is our Savior.

With his blood he has saved us;
With his power he will raise us;
To God be the glory for the things
He has done.

WE BELIEVE THAT THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD.

So we ask people to profess the Christian faith as found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

When Peter instructs believers on living a holy life, he quotes Scripture. When Jesus fought Satan in the wilderness temptation, he quoted Scripture. When I struggle with the beast of cancer in the middle of the night, I quote Scripture. The Psalmist is right: (119:105) “God’s word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.” When we are angry, it reminds us that vengeance belongs to God. When we are alone it reminds us we are not forsaken by God. When we are anxious it reminds us to consider the birds of air. The Bible says: “Come hell or high water, come affliction or hardship, come persecution, hunger, nakedness, peril or sword; come whatever may, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

We need an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll. In an age of relativism where you pick your way and I’ll pick mine, we need access to objective truth. In an age of utilitarianism, where whatever works is considered good, we need a higher standard of living. In an age of hedonism, which says if it feels good, do it, we need a better purpose for being. In times like these we need the Bible, not just some narrow interpretation of it; not just some proof text of it; but its whole story of justice and mercy and everything else that is necessary for salvation.

WE BELIEVE THAT A HOLY LIFE IS POSSIBLE.

So we encourage people according to the grace given to them to live a Christian life and become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. The world stopped this week to mourn the death of Pope John Paul II, a holy man of our time. Millions of people, including the aristocrats and us ordinary cats, flooded the streets of Rome to pay their last respects. Even newscasters closed their grizzly claws long enough to pay tribute to the people’s pope. One politician was quoted as saying, “An air of spirituality fills Rome.” What happened to us this week? Did we finally have a life lived before us that was worth celebrating? How long has it been since you heard the word “holy” used in public this often? Did the world finally find a legitimate hero?

It was John Wesley’s deep conviction that all Christians, and especially the Methodists, were called to live a holy life and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. He took this quote of Peter seriously. Verse 15: “Just as he

who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” Now holiness is not some achievement accomplished but a gift of grace received. Holiness is not reserved for super-Christians but available for every Christian.

My grandson was describing first grade to me which he is to enter this fall. “After that,” he said, “I will be in second grade, then third grade, then fourth grade.” And with a mild panic on his face he exclaimed, “I have a really, really long way to go!” That is how I feel about holiness. I have a long way to go. But I have never been more serious about living a Christian life and doing the will of God than I am now. I am sure the same is true for many of you.

Now is the time for people everywhere to affirm their faith and live their beliefs. Will you join me in an affirmation of our faith?