

You are Blessed

1 Peter 3:13-22

Sometimes we think we suffer – and maybe we do; but how do we handle persecution for our faith. At first read, our text seems to be calling us to an unrealistic standard. Our society says that we should always be healthy, wealthy and wise...have not pain, no suffering, no anxiety. But our text says: "Do not be afraid of those who want to harm you." Really? "Do not get upset"? Intellectually, we can understand this standard, but when push comes to shove, is this really livable? Of course, for Jesus it was, but the point of our text is not to put distance between Jesus and us, but to do just the opposite, that is, for us to grow closer to being able to live like Jesus in our own lives. Of course, we may not want actually to live the life that Jesus led, as his was filled with scorn, mockery, violence, and misunderstanding. However, we who believe Jesus to be the most complete revelation of the nature of God's love, and who seek to make that love real in our own lives, can look to none other than Jesus for our model. The question is how? How does our text allow us to grow closer to living a life like Jesus, when it so easily can be perceived as setting an unreachable standard that only Jesus met?

To begin, let's look first to the end of our text, where we find a discussion about baptism. The process of growing closer to living a life like Jesus begins with a recognition of the meaning of our baptism. Our baptism represents the notion that before anything else, God loved us. What came first in each of our lives was a love from God, which is unaffected by whether or not we choose to respond to or recognize that love. God loves

us—period. We may not feel it. Some may not want it. Others may choose to ignore it. Regardless of our response, God's love endures. And, when we accept God's love and are baptized we are invited to perceive our lives through a new lens, from a perspective that is broader than our own limited assessment of self.

The lens is God, whose assessment of our intrinsic and eternal value is positive, so positive that Jesus was willing to die for us. To begin to perceive our lives, our value, our worth through this lens, is to begin to free ourselves from the tyranny of self-pity and doubt, which are all too often the byproducts of suffering and see ourselves as blessed. Suffering endured without connection to a greater purpose—suffering that we experience while void of any sense of a larger blessed identity—produces only self-pity, fear, and doubt. But when we begin to perceive ourselves as first and foremost loved and blessed by God, whether we think we have earned that distinction or not, is to begin to widen our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual horizons, to see beyond that which oppresses in the here and now. Rather than being consumed by the suffering, we are rejuvenated by the recognition of a larger purpose, a connection to a power greater than that which oppresses; and God's blessings.

In this way we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to grow closer to an ability to live as Jesus did—to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to love those who torment us, to lift up in prayer those who seek to tear us down. In this way, and perhaps more effectively than in any other, we "defend our confidence in God." For the greatest defense comes not from words, but from actions. To engage the world and those who would oppress us in this way, is most fully to defend or reveal our confidence in God. The more able we are to reveal our confidence in God through behavior choices, the more

closely we grow to living like Jesus, whose entire life was a picture of living confidently in God. This is how we are called to live when we know we are blessed by God.

But what of "those who disobeyed." The author referred to those in Noah's day who angered God to the point of flooding the earth. The broader implication is for all of us, not just those in Noah's time, to avoid disobeying God. Obeying God is an interesting and important concept. The call to obey has existed for many, many years; it goes all the way back to Adam and Eve, who did not obey God. Today, however, the word "obey" gets a bad rap. Some say it is oppressive and insensitive.

The word "obey" in Hebrew means to listen closely, to listen acutely. So, for example, when God told Adam and Eve to obey, God was not saying, "Do what I tell you, or else." No, God was saying, "Listen closely to me." What made Jesus so great was that he listened so closely to God, which led him to serve and to love humanity in radical, selfless ways. In speaking of obedience in our text, Peter's point was not to threaten us. Rather, it was to awaken in us the desire to listen closely to God, to listen to God in a way that reveals our confidence in God. As we do so, we will avoid the paths set by those of Noah's day, who did not rely on God. Their confidence in God was weak at best and nonexistent at worst. Instead, ours will be a story of close listening. Ours will be a story of trust, of confidence in God, revealed most clearly in our actions toward others. To live this way is to grow closer to living as Jesus did (**Gordon McClellan**) and know we are blessed – regardless to our situation and suffering.

As Christians we are called to live just lives that are above reproach. How we live becomes their best defense against those desiring our ruin; but even when living justly fails to prevent persecution, such a life should still

be lived for the sake of righteousness and justice. Let such a life shame those who malign our lifestyle; if questioned as to why we remain Christians, answer courteously. Let us look to Christ as our example. Innocent of malice or wrongdoing, he suffered upon the cross, an act that brought humanity back to God. **Miguel A. De La Torre**

We know we are blessed...because we are eager to do what is good...we do not fear what others fear... we are blessed because we are not intimidated... we are blessed because we have sanctified Christ as Lord in our hearts.... we are blessed because we are always ready to make our defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us.... we are blessed because we can give our defense with gentleness and reverence... we are blessed because we keep our conscience clear... we are blessed because we know when we are maligned, those who abuse us for our good conduct in Christ may be put to shame... we are blessed because although we know we may suffer for doing good, we still know we are blessed... we are blessed because we accept the fact that Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God... we are blessed because we know Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit... we are blessed because we have been baptized into Christ... we are blessed because we believe and accept that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and because He lives, we live also, regardless of what we are experiencing.

There is a song *We're Blessed* by Fred Hammond that tells us to walk in faith, with the assurance that we are indeed blessed. The chorus says:

Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed

We're blessed in the city
We're blessed in the field
We're blessed when we come and when we go

We know that whatever our situation, we are people who are blessed by God and are empowered to live in confidence by what he has done for us through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.