

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Lent I]
February 21, 2021
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From Text to Life
1 Peter 3:18-22

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Late 2019, the world's attention focused on Hong Kong. Against the violence of the government, numerous people—from teens wearing school uniforms to senior citizens—protested for their freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Before the violence of military and police forces, many were killed, injured, beaten, and captured. But they did not submit to physical threats, and their fight still continues today.

A couple of weeks ago, a country in southeast Asia—Myanmar, also known as Burma—has suffered a military coup, announcing a year-long state of emergency and arresting opposition figures including Aung San Suu Kyi. Before the military forces with tanks and violence, young protesters were killed, injured, beaten, and captured. But they also keep fighting in order to protect freedom and democracy against the repressive military rule. What made the Hong Kong citizens, Myanmar citizens, and all those who risk their lives to the death fight against violence, injustice, oppression, and more?

Here is another group of people who suffered from physical persecution and social prejudice but who kept doing what is good and right before God. Before the violence and even threats to their lives, they did not submit. What made them do so?

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According to the Lectionary schedule, we read 1 Peter 3:18-22, commemorating the first Sunday of Lent. There are still some controversies about its author, but it may safely be said that the First Letter of Peter was written by Peter who was an apostle of Jesus Christ (v. 1), and an elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ (5:1). And its recipients were Jewish and Gentile Christians who were widespread to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1).

By the way, the tone of the letter is somewhat heavy. There are numerous words like trials, pain, and suffering throughout all of the chapters. This is because the first letter was written around 64 A.D. right before Peter was martyred in Rome. You know what? The year of 64 A.D. was when the Great Fire of Rome occurred. Emperor Nero blamed the cause of the fire on the Christian communities in the city and initiated his first persecution against the Christians. The persecution started in the city first, and then it became widespread to the whole Roman Empire. And the persecution persisted until the Edict of Milano¹ was proclaimed in 313 A.D. Thus, the Christians scattered from Rome to far-off cities like Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia. However, they could be hardly be free from the persecutions. Wherever Christians moved, they were stigmatized as an antisocial community because they were

¹ Edict of Milan, proclamation that permanently established religious toleration for Christianity within the Roman Empire. It was the outcome of a political agreement concluded in Mediolanum (modern Milan) between the Roman emperors Constantine I and Licinius in February 313.

against Roman authority, religion, culture, and tradition; a cannibal community because citizens believed that Christians used to partake Christ's real body and blood; and an offensive community against public morals because Christians insisted that all are brothers and sisters in Christ and love each other. Thus, the recipients of the First Letter of Peter must have been under severe physical and spiritual persecution.

(3)

With this understanding, let us examine today's passage. The passage is part of the Apostle Peter's teaching about "suffering for doing right." He exhorted his readers to have "unity of spirit, sympathy, love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (v. 8). And he continued, "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing" (v. 9). Peter encouraged them to be eager to do what is good before God with gentleness and reverence because it is better to suffer for doing good. This is what Jesus already and frequently taught His disciples and followers. Jesus said to His disciples, "Everyone will hate you because of me" (Luke 19:17), and to His followers, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

Even though Christians seemed antisocial, cannibalistic, and immoral in the eyes of citizens in each city, they believed they were doing right according to God's righteousness, Jesus's teachings, Holy Communion, and love and care for each other. And this was possible for them because they had strong conviction and faith in Jesus Christ. Peter reminded them of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ with whom he spent about three years; with whom he experienced true authority and power; and whom he witnessed crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension.

(4)

I believe we act as much as we believe. The early Christians could do so, because in 64 A.D., there were still people who saw Jesus in person, who saw His authority and power, and who were really there where Jesus died, was resurrected, and ascended. Or at least, those who had no experience with Jesus received the good news and teachings of Jesus directly from the disciples and apostles. The disciples (now apostles) and unknown believers had "experience of Jesus" in their life. And their experience, witness, and faith were written in the Bible and handed over for about 2,000 years, into our hands today.

Do your knowledge and faith about Jesus still remain in the text? Or does the text become your experience and invigorate your life? Do you still meet Jesus in the text? Or in your life? It is time to shift Jesus Christ from the text to your life. The season of Lent will be an optimal time for all of us to meet Jesus Christ. And the spiritual guidebook "The Path of Jesus: 40 Days of Spiritual Journey" will help lead you from the text to life with Jesus. Every day for 40 Days, we will visit places Jesus visited, taught about the Kingdom of God, and performed holy miracles. There, we will come to remain, imagine, meditate, and reflect our lives. With a deep and slow breath, we will walk along the path of Jesus slowly but steadily, and I believe we will meet Jesus at the end of the path. Please join our spiritual journey all together. Amen.