

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who suffered in the flesh for you, Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

I attended college, the first time, back in the late 1970s. I remember the great blizzard of 1977-78. I also remember the great blizzard was only one of many snowstorms that year. In fact, we didn't have a full week of school in the winter quarter that year until finals week. Of course, we'd have good weather for that... I was taking Organic Chemistry among my various classes that quarter. The professor, whose name I've long forgotten, used to come to class and say something like, "Last time we met we were on chapter 4. After two snow days while you slept in and partied, I kept on going. I'm now on chapter 7.

The last time I preached from this pulpit we were on chapter 2 of First Peter. Then we had our VBS celebration last Sunday. While you all were celebrating, I kept going. I'm now on Chapter 4. I hope you kept up by reading chapter 3... In case you didn't here's the Reader's Digest version... Peter begins chapter 3 by encouraging wives and husbands to honor one another. The language might make some of us cringe by today's standards, but remember Peter was writing during a time when the patriarchy was alive and in full swing. If he were writing today I think he would use different wording... Peter then went on to remind the early Christians to always do good. Not to earn their salvation, but so that others would see them doing good, even during hard times and times of persecution and as a

result would see the glory of God reflected in them and through their kindness in the face of suffering, would be won over to Christ. Finally, Peter exhorts all of us to always be ready to defend why you could have such hope despite all the pain and suffering going on all around. Why were those early martyrs unwilling to renounce Jesus as Lord, even when facing certain death? What did they have that helped them keep the faith despite oppression and persecution? Chapter three ends with a brief description of all that Christ suffered and how God has seated Him at God's Right Hand, the seat of power. I can't tell you why God did it that way , but it's clear that suffering comes before God's Glory... First the cross, then the crown—first Good Friday, then Easter Sunday...

That brings us up to speed and we're ready to look at Chapter four, which begins with a reference to Christ's suffering on our behalf. Since Christ did all of that for you, now, through your present suffering, you are joined to Christ in the suffering He endured for you. Peter isn't talking about your general, run of the mill suffering here. I'm not sure he knew what arthritis is or how painful your Crone's Disease is. I'm quite certain Peter never felt the pain associated with growing old, since he was crucified upside down on a hill in Rome called the Vatican. The suffering Peter refers to is the suffering you endure for proclaiming God's love and forgiveness to a Christ-less world. You see, people who already see themselves as basically good, don't understand the Gospel message of

repentance. They see no need to repent, they're already good people. Asking them to repent is offensive to them and can make them very angry. Just look what they did to Jesus... If you are really following in Christ's footsteps, don't expect a bed of roses, unless you're willing to lay down amongst the thorns...

In our Scripture for today, Peter says it doesn't make us better people to suffer justly. If you are a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even just a mischief maker and suffer, you're just reaping what you've sown. The suffering Peter's talking about is when you try to help someone, and they rebuff you and call you vile names just for offering to help. When you suffer for doing good, that's when you're joined to the suffering of Christ. The aches and pains we feel in our old age are nothing, but the results of good hard living. I don't know how you deal with your age-related aches and pains, but I try to celebrate each and every one because they remind me of my youth and how I got this far. I know I haven't always taken care of this body and the pains I have now were earned by living life to the fullest at every age all the way to the present.

Peter addresses the fact that we all face the judgement of Christ. The living and the dead will be held accountable. We believe that Jesus descended to Hell as we confess in the Creeds. Peter is referring to this when he states "the Gospel was proclaimed even to the dead." It's my belief and the beliefs of most scholars that this is what Jesus did on Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter.

He descended into Hell and proclaimed the Gospel to the dead, giving them the same opportunity we have during our lives, to repent from evil and to turn to God for our help and salvation.

Peter and Paul both shared the belief that the Second coming of Jesus would be very near. They both tried to answer the question about what happens to Christians who heard the Gospel, responded in Faith, but then died before Christ's Second Coming. That's a very relevant question for all of us who have lost loved ones and may be facing questions of our own mortality as we suffer the aging process. Not many of us suffer persecution for our faith, but we all face the inevitable judgement of this world in the flesh. That judgment is death itself. Every day we march closer and closer to that day when we will face the judgement in the flesh. The older I get the more I tend to think about death. I used to think I was invincible. Now I struggle to put on my pants without losing my balance and falling over... The wages of sin is death, but the good news in Christ is that we have been given this incredible gift of eternal life with God. We've been given the best gift of all, forgiveness of our sin and along with that, the opportunity to live our lives by doing the will of God. When our sin is wiped away so is the judgement in the flesh. My dear Church, eternity starts now. Yes, we will all die, but as Luther said, we don't fear the little death, because it's no more than the gateway to eternal life.

So, now what? What are we to do with the rest of our lives, now that Jesus has suffered once and for all, for you and for me? After Jesus was resurrected he asked Peter, not once or twice, but three times if he, Peter, loved Jesus. Once for each time Peter denied knowing Jesus. Each time Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” When Peter said, “Yes, I love you Lord...” Jesus told him to, “Feed My Sheep.” This was Peter’s reinstatement back into the group of Jesus followers and his Commission to bring the Word of God to all people through good works and kindness and the proclamation of the Gospel. Feeding hungry people has always been on Jesus’ list of good deeds. Peter reminds the Churches that even though they are facing a fiery ordeal, the work must go on. When we continue in doing good, no matter the costs, people, especially the ones who don’t yet know God’s love, will see what we’re doing and want to know more. That’s when we get the opportunity to give the defense for the hope that we have in Christ’s saving act of love on the cross. He obeyed all the law perfectly. He lived a sinless life, yet died a cruel death for us, in our place. His goodness and his righteousness cover not just a multitude of sin, but each and every sin, from the little white lie to the most heinous murder. Jesus’ righteousness covers even my sin and yours too. That’s some pretty good news for a sinner like me. How about you?

May the goodness of our God transform you into the righteous person God created you to be. May the Good News of your salvation bring you joy and hope

even during the present suffering. May the joy of everlasting life cover all your pain and provoke you to even greater acts of love and kindness in the name of our Savior and our Lord, Jesus Christ, until either we join that great heavenly feast prepared for us or Jesus does return and brings heaven to earth for all flesh to see. Either way, may God's glory shine in everything we do, now and forever, amen.