

Suffer a Little While

I Peter 5:6-11

Odd how in these days of extreme social distancing I have never felt closer to so many. Why, every time I log onto its website my bank tells me, “We're here for you!” I got a flier addressed to “Occupant” from a window sales and installation company that said, “We're here for you!” (And they don't even know my name!) A local dentist advertising on the radio said, “We're here for you!” Ditto from the Social Security Administration, the State of Indiana and Best Buy, from whom we bought the high definition web camera making this worship production look ever so much sharper.

It is almost as if some genius public relations firm sold the entire world the same slogan. I understand: people are trying to make connections across unprecedented boundaries. They're trying to make a living. What else could they say? “We're hoping you won't forget us when we're all allowed out of our caves again”? “Be a pal and help us out—revenue is down seventy percent”? “We're just trying to find the nicest thing we can say to lonely people”? But retreating from threats out there in the big, bad world is nothing new for Christians. From the very start people have died because they followed Jesus. Steven was stoned within weeks of Christ's resurrection. Perhaps thirty years later Christians took to the catacombs of Rome to escape Emperor Nero's persecution. And not ten years after that somebody wrote I Peter to Christians living in what is now Northern Turkey, encouraging them them to, “Cast all

your anxieties on (God), for he cares about you.”

I say “somebody” wrote I Peter because Peter himself did not. Its Greek is fluid and elegant, never the product of a Jewish fisherman. My inquiries into its authorship lead me to prefer the theory Peter dictated his thoughts to a man named Silvanus (aka Silas), his assistant. Whoever put quill to parchment, we know why he wrote: to encourage Christians suffering persecution. Humble yourselves, he tells them. Cast your anxieties on God. Be disciplined, watchful. Resist your enemies. You may suffer thereby but “after you have suffered a little while, the God of grace, who has called you into his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish and strengthen you.”

Michael Grossberg teaches the history of American social policy at IU Bloomington. He writes that the world has never reacted to a pandemic as it has to COVID-19. The plagues of the Middle Ages did not lead to shut-downs and social distancing. Only the aristocracy could retreat to country houses. Everybody else went on with business as usual until they died. (Many of the aristocrats died, too.) Medical science had advanced considerably by the influenza outbreaks of the 19th and 20th centuries. But if more people tried withdrawing from society than before, the vast majority of the world's population just put its head down and kept going unless and until they no longer could.

In both cases—plague and influenza—church leaders had a checkered record. Some claimed God would never strike down the faithful. Some insisted on preserving

for the priesthood its traditional role as doctors; ignorant as the clergy actually were about basic hygiene, let alone microbes and viruses. Ken Follett did a masterful job of dramatizing this in his novel, World Without End. Today we see the same Red/Blue divide that bedevils us in every arena raising its ugly head in the churches as they react to public health measures taken to combat COVID-19. I subscribe to the email lists of two ministerial alliances in Terre Haute, one more conservative, the other more liberal. Messages in the conservative group proclaim its churches have opened and call the ones that haven't unpatriotic. Messages in the liberal group tell us their churches have not yet opened and call those that have foolish.

Instead of using this crisis to bash our “enemies”, I want to turn to the Word of God without prejudging its message based on my political or social preferences. Christians have always suffered. What has God called us to do about it? In I Peter we find imperative verbs giving us the guidance we need. Humble yourselves. Cast your anxieties on God. Be disciplined, watchful. Resist your enemies. Exactly what do these instructions mean for us as we react to the threat of this virus?

Humble yourselves. Humility is an important component of prayer. The practice of kneeling in prayer makes humility concrete. The word “prayer” itself comes from a Latin word that means “to beg”. Many of our prayers come from a place of humility. So much the more when we face a crisis ought we to humble ourselves and pray to God for health, protection, wisdom.

Cast your anxieties on God. The commentaries make much of the force of the active verb “to cast”. It describes an act of will that causes us to throw something away with violence. Determine to throw away your fears. Do so in prayer, but also by seeking the support of your fellow Christians. I know of a great deal of this already happening, but I urge the church to reach out even more to those living alone in these days of lock down. The connections we make in the church can help us all cast off our anxieties onto God's broad shoulders. Let us help each other throw them there!

Be disciplined, watchful. Keep washing your hands! Wear those masks! The former helps to keep us from becoming infected; the latter helps to prevent us from infecting others. If we really do want to be there for each other, this is an easy way to prove it. Equally importantly, be disciplined emotionally. As the weeks wear on our ability to keep up our spirits wanes. Our ability to give each other grace weakens. Continue to tap into the emotional and spiritual energy offered us through the Holy Spirit to keep making the effort.

Resist your enemy. But take care that you determine who your enemies actually are. The Bible speaks of The Enemy, Satan. Whatever you believe about the devil, understand that evil gets at us through our cracks, through boredom, temptation, exhaustion and the like. This is no superficial, pop-science analysis. Our weaknesses can make us terribly vulnerable. They can lead us to behave in ways that damage—or even destroy—relationships. They can push us into a loss of faith and despair. Stay strong. Find strength in the very things we have already mentioned: in prayer, and in

fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christians have always suffered. Honestly, the vast majority of humans of all stripes have always suffered. The question is not whether we suffer, but how we will react to our suffering. The author of I Peter tells us our present suffering, while real, will last only a little while. Then we will enter into the glory of God. This reflects the ancients' expectation that all of life involved suffering. Only death and the promised new life with Christ would end their suffering. While we moderns typically do not experience suffering as pervasively, the year of Our Lord 2020 has brought suffering home to all of us with new force. But this, too, shall pass. We shall suffer this pandemic only for a little while. It may seem like a long time just now, and understandably. But in the big picture it, too, will pass.

In the meanwhile, follow the biblical advice given to those who must endure: Humble yourselves. Cast your anxieties on God. Be disciplined, watchful. Resist your enemies. Trust that by using the tools the Spirit offers to empower us to do these things, you will emerge from these times with stronger relationships with God and the

p
e
o
p
l
e
o