

The Reverend Mike Riggins
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Hardship

Isaiah 45:1-7
I Peter 4:12-14

I can now add a new one to my list of unlikely movies from which I have gotten sermon illustrations: Men in Black II. Will Smith's character is mocking Tommy Lee Jones' character. Jones' wife has left him and he obsessively uses the vast surveillance capabilities of the agency for which they work to watch her. Smith asks him why she left, and did she ever remarry? Then he says, "You know what they say: better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." Jones leans near to him, and in that fabulous raspy voice of his, says, "Try it." Losing loved ones hurts. It is well to have loved, but when we lose them—however it happens—it hurts. All suffering hurts. So when the Apostle Peter writes, "rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings," we can be forgiven for wanting to lean in and say, "Try it."

Peter writes to people who understand suffering. These Christians live in what we now call northern Turkey. They have begun to experience persecution. Adherents of the dominant religion in the area have noticed their growth in numbers, and that they have separated themselves from communal life. Suspicious and threatened, these neighbors have harmed the Christians both verbally and physically. In many towns the Christians have been prohibited from holding positions of authority and the informal, personal network that assists people in need has been taken away from

them. Peter writes to people feeling isolated, intimidated and fearful.

In this case, “Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings,” may sound a bit insensitive. At the beginning of the counseling training I received in seminary, like all students I was required to sit in silently while a credentialed counselor met with a hurting family. I did so through three or four sessions. Eventually the counselor asked my opinion (privately, thank God, not in front of the family). I told her what I thought. I thought they were whiners. I thought they could easily make different choices. I thought the teen-aged daughter was running the whole show and she needed to be put in her place. When I finished the counselor just stared at me. She finally said, “We have a *lot* of work to do on you.” They did do that work, and now I have thirty-eight years of experience. I will let those of you who have sought my counsel judge how well I do it, but I want to emphasize I am happy to do my best for you should you wish to come see me about any spiritual and/or emotional needs you have.

While Peter may seem as rough around the edges as young Mike was, he is actually making a theological point. Christ *had* to suffer. In I Peter 1:3 we read, “By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” In order to resurrect, Jesus first had to die. In order to die, he had to suffer. And the point of it all was to help those who believe in him to get born anew. Peter continues with, “(and we have) an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith *for salvation...*” Suffering produces salvation. Peter believes it is well worth the cost.

And Peter adds to this theological point about Christ's suffering for our sins a word of encouragement: "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." The text does not include the word holy before spirit, nor does it capitalize spirit. Nevertheless, we must work fairly hard to deny Peter has the Holy Spirit in mind here. "The spirit of glory and of God" can be no other. And we often perceive that spirit most clearly when we hurt the most. Betty (her real name) played the piano at our Tuesday afternoon worship services at a retirement community in Traverse City, MI. Another woman had brought in a magazine article about people in the community who claimed to have seen ghosts. The attendees discussed it before we started the service. Betty listened for a while, as some said they believed these reports while others discounted them. Finally she said, "Well I don't know about ghosts, but I have seen a spirit."

Now Betty was a practical, no-nonsense character. So we all just stared at her. We could tell she meant what she said. She went on to relate that her adult daughter had died a few years before following a grueling, nasty battle with cancer. When she died in her hospital bed Betty, sitting beside her, saw a wispy figure "come off" of her daughter and "come onto" herself. She said she was not frightened, just terribly sad. When this spirit settled on her she kept all the pain, but also immediately felt confident she could bear it. She told us something like, "I have always felt it was my daughter's spirit. It was telling me I could do this."

Whatever we may believe about ghosts and spirits, this story really does not

stray very far from the New Testament teachings about God's Holy Spirit. Visible or invisible, we believe it is God at work among us, here and now. It can offer us support in grief, courage in the face of spiritual intimidation, healing of all kinds. When the spirit of God rests upon us we can endure whatever suffering we may experience. Very few of us have ever experienced persecution for our faith in Jesus Christ. Almost all of us have lost a loved one. Almost all of us have felt doubt about Christ's resurrection creeping into our hearts and heads. Almost all of us have felt frustration and anger with others in the church. We have the Spirit resting on us. It has "come onto" us. When we hurt, turn to that Spirit in prayer and in fellowship with the church and you will come to know you, too, can do this.

Though he wrote to Gentiles, Peter was himself a Jew. His people had known more than their fair share of suffering. The anonymous prophet scholars call Second Isaiah communicated the vision we read today to Peter's ancestors, to a people enslaved far from the Promised Land. By the power of that same spirit of God, Second Isaiah has foreseen that God intends to free his people and send them home. And he plans to use a Gentile to do it. Cyrus, the emperor of the Persians, will release the Jews. Cyrus is one of the greats of history. Under his enlightened and efficient leadership, the Persians (now the Iranians) defeated not one, not two, but three regional powers and dominated the largest territory known to history until the rise of the Romans some five hundred years later. Under Cyrus, the Jews gained human rights and many rose in the ranks of the imperial administration. These are the circumstances in which the Book of Esther happens.

Second Isaiah calls Cyrus “the anointed”. Hebrew used the same word for “messiah”. This is the only person called messiah in the whole of the Old Testament who was different from *the* Messiah, who would come from the line of the Hebrew king David. This oracle was written just before the Persians defeated the Babylonians, one of those rival powers. The Jews languished in slavery in Babylon. This vision predicts that Cyrus will defeat the Babylonians, and his armies did so within about twenty years of its writing. The Jews, an insignificant people from the Persian perspective, will petition for their freedom. Cyrus will grant it—and as the Book of Ezra tells us, he will send them home with a sizable gift of money. Most of them will return to the Promised Land, where they will race to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem before anybody else can attack them. But many of them, now free people, will move instead to the Persian capital city. For the record, Cyrus will order his troops to conduct a peaceful occupation of Babylon, thus encouraging peace between conquerors and conquered.

And why does God decide to free his people? Because God wants to. Because God can. The Jews have not earned their freedom through faithfulness to God's law. (The prophets tell us they did earn their suffering through faithlessness.) Some of our suffering results from bad choices we make. Some results from faithlessness. Much of it just happens. Why did Betty's daughter get cancer? As I do not recall what kind of cancer she had I cannot venture a guess about the potential roles played by genetics, diet, healthy living, environmental factors and etc. The fact is she got it. And it got her. But the spirit of God empowered Betty to endure her grief. Many of us know somebody who engages in destructive behaviors. Perhaps we can find ways to

encourage them to draw on the Spirit for the ability to make those hard changes that recovery requires. Or those whose faith is dying. Or whatever form of hardship they must endure.

The early Christians faced challenges we almost cannot imagine. Would you put your life on the line for your faith? Would I? Peter writes to people who are doing it every day. If they can do it, maybe we can. Maybe our suffering rarely comes from defending our faith. Yet we do suffer. The pandemic and social media overexposure have slammed the accelerator down on a horrible trend that has been coming for about twenty years. People from the ages of roughly seven to thirty-five years are experiencing unbelievable rates of depression. Suicide ideation has skyrocketed. Suicide has become the leading cause of death across this demographic. (The only exception is young black men, for whom gunshot wounds “top” the charts.) As Christians, we must respond with the power we know, that has come upon us: the Spirit of God. We must pray for their healing, but thoughts and prayers alone will not suffice. For this and every other form of suffering present in our culture we must find the spiritual power to care enough to get involved, to listen, to express our love. They are suffering. Let us do what we can to connect them with the power who told Second Isaiah, “I form light and create darkness, I make health and create woe. I am the Lord, and I do everything.” Let the source of all power bring power to bear on suffering: yours, your loved ones, your brothers and sisters in the church, on all we know. Suffering is no blessing, in and of itself. It is a heavy burden. But we have the Comforter, the Spirit, who helps us bear it. And that *is* a blessing.