Suffering Done Right
(1 Peter 3:15b-22)

This morning we’re going to be talking largely about that occasional discomfort we feel at times when the Christian message we bear isn’t necessarily received with open arms. I initially use the word discomfort because, compared to what believers in some other places in the world are enduring, I’m almost reluctant to use the words suffering or persecution to describe what’s happening here at home.

And I’m going to be preaching from Peter’s first letter, but not exactly as prescribed by our friend the Revised Common Lectionary, which includes only verse 18-22. Because when I first read these verses, it kind of seemed like something was missing. And as it turns out, it was.

In fact, upon closer inspection verses 18-22 don’t actually make much sense at all without the previous three or so verses. So I’ve expanded our epistle reading to include the second part of verse 15 through verse 17, all of which can be found on p. 183 of the New Testament portion of your pew Bible, if you’d like to follow the text. So, 1 Peter 3:15b-22 is our text.

Now, let me begin by saying a few words about suffering in general. We’ve talked before a time or two about how, when we find ourselves suffering, our reflexive question tends to be: Well, what did I do to deserve this? What did I do wrong? But what we’re going to see in this passage is that sometimes when you’re suffering, you may not have done anything wrong at all.

In fact, sometimes we end up suffering for doing exactly the right thing. And what I hope we’ll also see this morning is that the kind of suffering to which Peter is referring here is increasingly germane to our own time and place, because it has to do with antagonism toward our faith.

Earlier in chapter 3, Peter echoes the teachings of Jesus by urging believers who are being reviled not to retaliate, but instead to respond to abuse with blessing. You know, as Jesus said, “Bless those who persecute you.” And so today we start with verse 15b, where the author writes, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

That word “demands” seems to kind of set the stage that there’s antagonism going on here. Often due to their own suffering, many people simply can’t understand how we believers can be hopeful and optimistic in such a hard world. And there may be a critical edge to their curiosity. So Peter says, think and work through your faith to the point that, if people have questions about it, you don’t have to scratch your head or scuff your shoes and say, “Well, shoot, I don’t know why I’m hopeful. I’ll go ask my priest.”
No, it’s about owning your faith, summoning the courage to share about how God’s love and mercy have given you hope, and generally having the courage to go right to the source and reporting how Jesus and his kingdom really have been such “good news” to you that your life has been changed. But we’re to do so without criticizing, judging, verbally wrestling or getting defensive with people who have enquiring minds. Or, for that matter, people who become rather harsh about it all.

We can expect that people will ask hard questions, and maybe even boil over with hurts or resentments that land on us. And it may very well be our patient and loving demeanor that impacts them even more than our words. Peter says that this is one way of keeping our conscience clear if we are maligned for our faith (v. 16). In other words, if we keep our interpersonal noses clean (so to speak), we can know that their hostile response is their stuff and not our stuff, and that we don’t have to sweat it. We can just keep loving them.

“For it is better to suffer for doing good,” Peter says, “if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.” This verse, verse 17, is a very interesting one. First, it seems to infer that, even though our suffering never originates with God, God may allow it to happen for an overriding, good reason. Peter allows for the possibility that suffering might actually be within God’s will.

And indeed one very clear way in which suffering may be within God’s will, is if it becomes an opportunity to show our own love, serenity, and forgiveness in the face of struggle. I mean, what better way to prove the power of the good news? When someone attacks you and then expects a counterattack, it’s downright disorienting to them when it doesn’t happen! In fact it can be attractive, or at least it can get their attention. You see, carrying anger and resentment is a burden! And in a small way we can become the gentle response that disarms that burden.

And where does this gentle response come from? Well, this brings us to the five verses actually prescribed for today in our lectionary menu—verses 18-22. So rather than being a starting point, verse 18 actually is a key transition point upon which pivots the source and the reason for practicing forbearance and cultivating patience. Here Peter writes, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”

Two very important things about this: First, Christ is the model for our response to verbal antagonists of any kind. He’s the example par excellence of suffering for the right thing, and not the wrong thing. But Jesus went much, much further than mere forbearance or non-retaliation: He actually achieved an infinitely valuable result with his suffering by cleaning the slate—the slate of justice (or karma, if you prefer) for the whole human race. The Cross was the ultimate altruistic act. The righteous dying for the unrighteous personifies sacrificial love.

Jesus fulfilled those many ancient stories across times and cultures of the hero dying to save others, and he became the pattern for many subsequent hero stories. It’s still a
compelling theme that you see in many books and movies to this day. So where does the ultimate energy that powers sacrificial love come from? It comes from the creator God who became flesh, who bore insult and agony to give us eternal salvation.

And the second important feature in verse 18 is a little more subtle, but even more profound. Because it says that the main point of Christ's suffering was not to get us to heaven, or to afford us personal salvation, or to hand us a "get out of jail free" card, but to bring us to God himself! To bring us to the creator, the source, the fountainhead of all good, the Father of Lights from whom all good things come. “Christ suffered for sins, once for all, to bring us to God,” Peter says.

Here’s what one of my favorite preachers, John Piper, says about it: “If we could slip away from God's anger, or enter heaven, or get our sins forgiven but still not get to God, the Christian hope would be worthless. Suffering pain or death would not be worth doing good and remaining faithful to God. Yet this is precisely what God gives us in the gospel: Christ suffered to open a way to God.” And that way is the way of life, a life that only God can give us.

So when we wonder why we suffer, or fear that perhaps we deserve it, or feel that maybe it's meaningless and unfair, we have the example of Christ, the sinless one, whose seemingly senseless sacrifice has changed the world, and given us ultimate hope in life.

The next verses in our reading, verses 19 and 20, delve into Christ’s redemptive action among those he calls “the spirits in prison” during the time between his death and resurrection. The exact meaning of this has been hotly debated through history. There are more than enough nuances and explanations here to fire up a whole sermon. But in the end it might well generate more heat than light, so I’m going to mainly save those two verses for another time.

The mildly baffling reference to the time of Noah in verses 19 and 20 leads us in a little different direction as we approach the close of today’s text, and it has to do with the sacrament of baptism. Peter says, “Baptism, which [the flood] prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Now, what in the world could that mean? This isn’t easy stuff. I think that perhaps the best interpretation of this verse from Peter’s point of view, and in the context of suffering, is that we're saved from the waters of the flood of antagonism by the waters of baptism. We go down into suffering, then invariably come back up in the hope of new life. Listen to what Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk
in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

In other words, the sacrament of baptism isn’t just an outward, physical cleansing, but an imparting of new, resurrection life. And the power of baptism isn’t in the ritual itself, but in the fact that Christ chose it to be a physical vehicle for divine grace, because, as our catechism says, “The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.” The sacrament works because God means for it to work.

Through faith and baptism God makes us members of Christ’s body, and inheritors of God’s kingdom. And it’s with that hope that we face the discomfort and rejection that sometimes buffets our life of faith. When we’ve died to the demanding neediness of our old selves, and risen with the new, abundant life in God’s kingdom, the darkness of pain is slowly but surely replaced by the light of hope.

And the kingdom of God is indeed the final trump card, the game winner of this passage on suffering done right. In verse 22 Peter speaks of the resurrection of Jesus, “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” When on the Cross Jesus said, “It is completed”, it wasn’t only the redemption of humanity he was talking about. It was also the imminent realization of his lordship in heaven and on earth. Probably the very first creed of the Christian faith in the first century consisted of only three words: “Jesus is Lord.” I don’t know about you, but I personally find these to be words of great comfort.

When we’re scorned by a fearful and angry world, we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus is Lord, and in the end he’ll reward our faith in unimaginably wonderful ways. In fact when we experience suffering of any kind, we can call to mind that we live and die under the loving wings of the one who is now at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him.

God will never forget you, because you’re a sheep of his flock. You’re safe in God’s fold, and you’ll live forever in his abundant pastures. So take heart, speak boldly but kindly, and remember that the Lord has many other people whom he intends to bless through your faithfulness. Amen.