

Sermon AMC- In Defense of Hope

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:13-22

Sunday, May 21, 2017

A woman came into the beauty shop one day to get her hair fixed. Her beautician was noted to always be complaining about most everything. The customer stated that she was planning on leaving for Rome in a few days.

Beautician: Rome...Rome...Why that is one of the dirtiest cities you could ever go. How are you going to get there?

Customer: We are flying United Airlines.

Beautician: United...They are the worst airline! And they have the ugliest hostesses. Where are you staying?

Customer: We are staying in the Villa.

Beautician: Villa...Villa! Why that is so overrated and way too expensive. I wouldn't stay there if I were you. What are you going to see?

Customer: We are planning on seeing the Pope.

Beautician: Why girl, you would be lucky to even see him from long distance. Don't you know everyone wants to be around him. You won't be able to get within a mile of him.

A month went by and the customer went back to the beautician, hoping to break her of her bad habits. The beautician asked her what she has been doing and the customer replied that she had just got back from Rome.

Beautician: Rome...I bet your flight was bad.

Customer: No, the flight was great. They had actually overbooked the flights and gave us first class seating and fed us steaks all the way to Rome. And our hostess was the most handsome man I had ever seen!

Beautician: Well. What about the Villa?

Customer: Funny you should ask. The Villa had just completed a \$5 million restoration. They were also overbooked and we were forced to stay in the owner's personal villa. Wow! The accommodations, the service, we had everything, we lived like kings!

Beautician: Well...what about the Pope?

Customer: We took the tour to the Vatican. One of the guards tapped us on the shoulder and stated, "The Pope often entertains a few people now and then, would like to have a personal visit with the Pope?"

Beautician: I can't believe that. What did the Pope say?

Customer: He took one look at me and asked, “That’s the worst hair-do I had ever seen! Who fixed your hair?”

There are a lot of big themes in our passage today. There is “suffering for doing what is right”, there is the theme of “not being afraid” there is the theme of “keeping a clear conscience” there is the theme of “being a person of hope” and “being ready to explain your attitude of hope to those around you” just to name a few. To make sense of this text I want to take you to the big picture and to do that I need to set a little bit of context for you. The first thing to note is that this letter was written with the help of Paul’s literary secretary Silvanus. Silvanus’ help was necessary as this letter was written to the Gentiles living in Northern Asia Minor which would be present day Turkey. They spoke Greek and Greek would not have been Peter’s first language. Also this letter would have been an open letter to be read and circulated in the churches in the area. So the recipients would have been Gentile believers. Just one more thing. Peter also knew that these Gentile believers were suffering a lot for their faith. We are not sure of the exact dating so it is hard to figure out which Roman emperor was doing the persecuting. Whoever it was, Peter was trying to comfort these people in their suffering by helping them see the context and purpose for their suffering. I want you to look at our passage today with that lens. Now that is the literary context of our passage. Because we are reading a small portion of a large body of work I need to give you a conceptual context to the suffering that Peter talks about. And the conceptual context is this.

The larger attestation of Scripture is this, that our world is a fallen place. That means the whole human society, its individuals and institutions are messed up because it is under the ruler of God’s enemy. As a result John 7:7 can say that this world hates Jesus, and Jesus testifies that its works are evil. I John 5:19 is even more direct. It says, *9 We know that the whole world is under the power of the evil one.* As a result of satan’s rule people, this world is under a curse, violence is all pervasive, and we even have random tragic events like this

completely healthy young woman who died just recently, one day after giving birth because of a rare blood clot that got created in her system as a result of child birth. Thanks to social media lots of people were in on their tragedy. In this messed up world of ours not only do innocent people suffer, but we also have evil people prospering. Think about this, in a span of just the last 10 years of his life Hitler miraculously escaped over 30 assassination attempts. If any one of them had succeeded millions of lives could have been saved. But in this world it just does not work that way. We live in a world that is under the power of the evil one.

Add to that, if you are a Christ follower, this fallen world will come after you with a vengeance. This is not a abstract hypothesis but one of the promises Christ makes to us that we don't really like to talk about. John 15 verse 20 says 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well; It does not say they may persecute you. It says they will persecute you. In other words, if you are truly faithful to follow the things that Jesus is calling you to do, you will receive a push back from the world. And that push back will not be gentle at all. Let me share some stats. The website opendoorsusa.org reports that there are 322 Christians being killed for their faith every month, 214 churches and Christian properties destroyed every month somewhere in the world. And it is not just killing and destruction of property, there are 772 forms of violence against Christians. I don't know where each of you are in terms of having experienced any of this, but if you think that this does not happen in good old USA think again. I have heard of people who have lost their jobs or thrown out of their homes or dragged to court right here in good old USA, just because they would not compromise their faith, and all this in a country that is not anywhere on the map when it comes to persecution. Now you may be someone who at this point is thinking, well I am a Christian and I have not really experienced any real, persecution. If that is the case, come and talk to me. I

really would like to find out where you live and how you have managed to escape. Seriously! Know this friends, Jesus himself said this, if you are his followers, this fallen world will come after you with a vengeance.

Now apostle Peter has this to say to every Christ follower, “Never get out of bed without your garment of inexplicable hope”. OK I am paraphrase here. What he actually said was, Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that you have. Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that you have. This is really a very big deal so let me repeat the concepts here. Admittedly, this world we live in is pretty messed up. Every human being who ever walked the earth will experience some form of suffering. That is a guarantee. But if you are a believer, the world will find an extra 772 ways to come after you. Literally. Someone has actually sat and counted this! But of course the number is not important. What is important is Apostle Peter’s admonition, whatever you are going through, as you go through it with Christ, your suffering has three things that it is accomplishing. So pay attention.

The first purpose of a believer’s suffering, is to be the refiners fire. It is burning up the dross in your life. This is part of God’s disciplining plan for your life.

Disciplining fire involves burning up the unwanted parts of your life. I can tell you I have been through a few of those fires in my 45 years of life. I grew up in a very protected and pampered environment even though my family did not have much money in India. I grew up to be someone who was spoilt in the sense that I only did what I wanted to do and had very little ability to do what I did not like doing. And you know that, every job in the world has parts of it that no one likes doing. And unless you can get yourself to take care of the thorns and thistles in your job you don’t get to enjoy the fruits either. God is still working on me in that area, but I can tell you, at 45 I can handle a lot more thorns and thistles than I could handle

at 25 and I thank God for all the fires that burnt the dross that has given me the capacity I now have. Thank God for your refining fires.

The second reason you should thank God for the suffering you experience is that it plants something beautiful in you. In *Romans 5:3-5* Paul says, “we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” You see the suffering you go through is actually making you a beautiful human being in God’s eyes because people who have been through suffering have a remarkable character. When I was in seminary 12 years ago, I had the privilege of spending two weeks with the persecuted church in Vietnam. It was an experience I will never forget. Two young women in their 20s made an extremely deep impression on me. These women had just graduated from college and they had found Christ someone in their college experience and now were working for Campus Crusade in Vietnam. Now they had to keep their faith a secret but usually their landlord would get wind of their faith in a couple months. And as soon as they were found out they would get thrown out of their apartments and they had to look for a new place. But these women were not bitter at all that they had no safe place to stay. In fact every time they were thrown out of one place, they would take it as an opportunity to share the Gospel with a new landlord. You could see Paul’s words take shape in these two women standing right before your eyes. Their suffering had produced perseverance and perseverance character and character hope. And their character and hope in suffering had produced a beauty in these young women that no cosmetics would ever be able to mimic. Your suffering is not only removing the dross in your life, it is planting an inexplicable beauty into your soul, so rejoice.

The third reason you should be rejoicing in your suffering is that, through your suffering, something of God's larger plan is being furthered. Now of course you know how this worked in Christ's earthly ministry. Because Christ suffered obediently and because he suffered well as he took up the cross without a drop of bitterness or hatred in his soul he, that resulted in the ultimate victory of good over evil and the doors of salvation opened to the whole world. On a smaller scale because Christ's apostles were persecuted in Jerusalem, the apostles scattered and that resulted in the church spreading to the ends of the earth. It was the persecution that resulted in the furtherance of God's agenda. In our own cases, it may not be immediately evident, but know this even your suffering for the Gospel will result in the furtherance of God's agenda in some way, that may or may not be evident to you in your lifetime.

So thing about this my friends, the existence of suffering in this world is one of life's biggest mysteries and every religion has taken a stab at trying to explain the existence of suffering. The Hindus think that suffering exists because they need to work off their bad karma, but a lifetime of suffering, does not really do it and so people are stuck in an endless cycle of rebirths and within endless cycles of suffering. The Buddhists think that suffering is the result of the existence of desire. So take away all desire and you can take away all suffering. The problem is if you take away all desire, there is nothing left including any kind of love for either God or man. In fact Buddhist think by taking away desire they can literally extinguish the human soul. The Muslim think that the existence of suffering is the result of the whims of a God whose will is not subject to examination by human beings. You suffer without asking God why.

You my friends don't suffer in any of these ways. When you suffer for your faith, you are becoming privileged participants in the suffering of Christ, you are being shaped by God himself, God is removing the dross, replacing it with

perseverance and character and hope and using you to further some component of his grand agenda for the world. When you think about all the amazing things the persecution you face in bringing you, it should result is just this beaming radiant hope. And all the apostles knew that it was that hope in the face of suffering that was the bait for the world. So don't every stop exuding hope my friends. Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in you because your hope is the bait for the world. Let us pray.