

## ***“The only thing worthy of our fears is life without God”***

**May 29, 2011**

*Text: Acts 17:22-33, 1 Peter 3:13-22*

### I.

The letter of 1 Peter was to a group of Christians—in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century—who were enduring unmerited persecution and suffering. In many ways, the suffering and persecution were understandable ... after all, Christianity was just getting started. And to many in the dominate culture, there was a lot about these Christians that seemed odd:

1. All this attention and adulation for one who died on a cross ... dying on a cross was viewed—largely—as humiliating ... and repugnant as well.
2. And then there was the matter of the Christian’s special gatherings with meals ... where they drank Jesus’ blood and ate his body!! What was all this about?

In every historical period—however unjust or unfair—unmerited suffering is common to the human situation. But, of course, it’s never easy ... trying to cope with it ... and make sense of it. Real life situations that bring suffering:

1. It may be circumstances of birth, like when we’re born into poverty ... or into a family with an alcoholic parent ...
2. Or when we’re born with congenital health problems ...
3. or go through an unjust layoff in the work place.
4. Or it could be with some random misfortune. It happens every day ... being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

### II.

The author of 1 Peter wants to sound a tone of reassurance and hope. Right away, he makes the point:

***If you suffer for doing the right thing, it is a blessing for you.***

And then, the point he really wants to make:

***Don’t fear what the world fears. Do not be intimidated!  
But in your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord.***

1 Peter has already talked about what this means. It means to live the Christian life which is carefully laid out earlier, in verses 8-12 of this same third chapter. CHECK IT OUT! There are echoes of the **Sermon on the Mount** here:

1. Have a unity of spirit, says 1 Peter; have sympathy and love for one another ...
2. have a tender heart and a humble mind ...

3. do not repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse ... but, repay with a blessing.
4. In all things, turn away from evil and do good.

Sounds pretty Christian, doesn't it?

The larger point—again—*if we live the Christian life, we have nothing to fear*. This is basic Christianity. It's powerful stuff. It goes right to the depths and to the heart of what our Christian faith is about.

### III.

If we think about our lives—and all that we have to deal with in our lives—there is a lot that that we could fear.

In a writing entitled, *I Will Not Leave You Orphaned*, preacher Barbara Lundblad says:

*Years ago I read something odd: The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home.*

*That's an exaggeration, of course, she says, for we all know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But then, she goes on, there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when FEAR sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, **This is crazy! I'm going home.***

Our lives can be like that, can't they? No matter how strong our faith, we all have moments when fear touches us:

1. a strange noise in the middle of the night ...
2. an unexpected phone call at four o'clock in the morning ...
3. the sudden onset of a tornado or the threat of a hurricane ...
4. *A just missed* accident in the car ... when we thought for sure we were going to be hit ... but it didn't happen—as a ripple of fear runs through our body.

Still, if we let it, fear can be paralyzing. It can take us out of our game (or, the way we live) and make it difficult for us to embrace life.

### IV.

Most of you have heard of the cartoon strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*. One day Calvin comes marching into the living room early one morning. His mother is seated there in her favorite chair. She's sipping her morning coffee. She looks up at young Calvin ... and, instantly, she's both amused and amazed at how he's dressed.

Calvin's head is encased in a large space helmet. A cape is draped around his neck,

across his shoulders, down his back and is dragging on the floor. One hand is holding a flashlight and the other a baseball bat. Seeing this, we sort of go, *okay!*

*What's up today?* Asks his mom.

*Nothing, so far,* answers Calvin.

*So far?* She questions. *What does THAT mean?*

*Well, you never know,* Calvin says. *Something could happen today.* Then Calvin marches off, muttering: *And if anything does, by golly, I'm going to be ready for it.*

Calvin's mom sort of pauses, pensively, and says, very directly: *You know, I need a suit like that.*

Well—some days—don't we all? Because some days we feel like that, too.

- With so much on our plate ...
- so many challenges before us ... obstacles to overcome ... stuff to deal with ...
- With so much random craziness in the world ...
- the way people drive ... the mean-spirited things people do or say ... and the unforeseen things that happen to us.

Some days a protective suit would seem like a good idea.

## V.

*But who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?* Says 1 Peter. *For even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.* And then, again: *Do not fear what the world fears.*

For the world's fears are misplaced.

1. The world fears being viewed as weak or vulnerable ...
2. it fears any deficiency of financial and social power.
3. The world fears too much dependence on anything beyond the self.
4. *Worldly interests* support, implicitly, the culture of greed and self-centeredness that is so profligate in much of our modern culture.

The world says its good and your right to do your own thing ... and to look out for #ONE. The world thinks that wealth saves ... that status and privilege save ... that power saves ... that military might saves.

However, the word from 1 Peter this morning is **Hey, hold on a minute!**

1 Peter is trying to reassure these early Christians and us ... not to fear suffering for doing what is right. Over time, the good that we do will be a blessing—for the world and for us. It is this faith and this confidence which reassures us:

***Do not fear what the world fears ...***

The implication here is that ... ***The only thing worthy of our fears is life without God.***

## VI.

This powerful belief in the unique saving power of God—and what God has done in Christ—emerged in the early church on the shoulders of the resurrection. The only thing that people of faith should fear is *life without God*. For these early Christians and for us, *life with God* is eternal.

And our LIFE with God is life in love. It is life in the spirit which flows from the heart of God and is strengthened by the acts of compassion and goodness that we do.

In doing the *right* thing, says 1 Peter, our *right* behavior puts others who seek to malign us to shame.

1. Acts of justice shame injustice.
2. Acts of goodness shame indifference and self-centeredness.
3. Acts of inclusiveness shame those who exclude.
4. Acts of SIZE, of being a BIG person, shame those who are small and petty.

1 Peter reminds us that there is a certain virtue in suffering for doing good.

## VII.

Our *life with God* is cemented in our faith in the resurrection ... which is God's exalted act of claiming Jesus' very life as *God's own life*. Resurrection faith says YES to the fullness of God being revealed in and through Jesus' life ... in his acts of LOVE.

It is the belief that this LOVE is alive ... and that our lives *in* this LOVE are eternal. Because LOVE and the spirit that gives LOVE cannot die. Therefore, we will NOT fear; for there is no fear in LOVE.

And so, we don't fear the things of the world: the lack of financial resources ... or military might. We don't fear any lack of status or position or earthly power. We don't fear illness or disease ... or alienation or rejection or failure ... or even death.

***The only thing worthy of our fears is life without God.***

Christ's suffering, therefore, was not in vain; for it was this Jesus—the one whom God claimed as God's very own—as God's Messiah—it was this Jesus that God resurrected.

And the life-force that was in Christ—namely, LOVE—is raised up as God's way for the world to see, to believe in and to emulate. Let us hold fast to our faith, therefore, for (as Paul reminds us in Corinthians):

*love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things  
and endures all things. Love never ends.*

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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