

## **Fueled by Faith**

### **1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**

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According to Open Doors, an education and advocacy group addressing Christian persecution, at least 388 million Christians worldwide suffer persecution because of their faith. In the last year, some 4,849 were killed - up almost 400 from the previous year - and 224,129 were forced out of their homes. For these Christ-followers, in order to protect themselves and still practice their faith, they must hide it. Some worship in secret basements. Some whisper hymns so neighbors will not hear. Some mothers teach their children the Lord's Prayer knowing it could cost them everything.

As Christians in the United States, most of us have never had to fear our safety because of our faith. So, it is easy for us to overlook the reality of persecution among others in the body of Christ. For many of us, following Jesus may cost us comfort or approval. For millions of Christians around the world, it can cost them their homes, their freedom, and even their lives.

Unfortunately, Christians have always been persecuted. First Peter is a letter which was written during the first century to encourage Christians who were suffering persecution across Asia Minor - new Christians who were understandably frightened and discouraged. Socially, they may have been mocked because the practices of the early church were considered strange or even cult-like. For example, early Christians were accused of cannibalism because they spoke of eating the body of Christ. Many became alienated from their families when they joined the Jesus movement. The church became their family.

Politically, Christians were seen as a threat to the Empire, and by the end of the first century, were imprisoned, tortured, or murdered for their faith. As Tertullian once wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." What made them threatening was that these churches embodied values that contradicted Rome's systems of power." Professor Valerie Nicolet writes about this, "Because they believed that Christ was Lord, and not Caesar, they strived to establish communities marked by love and solidarity rather than by hierarchy and a system of patronage and debt." Theologian Miguel A. de la Torre points out, "the early churches were persecuted not for what they *believed* but for what they *did*. They preached a message of liberation. To preach good news to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, sight for those blinded, and liberation to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19) is to reject conformity with the prevailing power structures".

So, these early Christians were suffering for following the teachings of Christ in a political system built on power, privilege, and fear.

Still, Christians are people of hope.

As moderate or progressive Christians today, we should, of course, be careful not to compare our struggles to the violent persecution of those early Christ-followers and of many Christians around the world today. Yet, we do know what it means to feel spiritually disoriented, discouraged, or alienated when the teachings of Jesus are distorted or used to harm rather than heal. When in the name of Christianity, the very values we understand to be Christian are under attack. Welcoming the stranger, justice for the poor and marginalized, love and compassion as the

glue that binds a community together, care for the least of these...these are fundamental principles that have guided our lives as Christians and yet are being challenged in the name of the very same God we worship and serve.

And still, we are people of hope.

That is why I am grateful to remember that this weekend is the last in Eastertide - the Christian season in which we continue the celebration of Christ's resurrection and God's promise that love wins. As we turn toward the rest of the Christian year, we must not forget what resurrection means for us. Resurrection is not denial. Resurrection is defiance. It is the refusal to believe that violence gets the last word, that empire gets the last word, that hatred gets the last word. Easter proclaims that God's love still rises.

Next weekend is Pentecost - the day we celebrate that after Jesus' death and resurrection, a rag tag group of disciples gathered together to form the Church. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they lived out and shared with others what Jesus had taught them, forming one community after another committed to the power of love and justice. And despite persecution, those communities grew and spread across the known world - because Christ-followers are people of hope no matter what their circumstances.

That truth is what First Peter is all about. One thing I really appreciate about this letter is that it doesn't deny that the readers are suffering. Suffering is a very real part of life - particularly for those who are powerless. Yet, he links that suffering to Christ's suffering and then links hope to Christ's resurrection. Suffering is real and miserable, yet the message of the resurrection is that God's love will overcome hate, and God's justice will prevail.

Thus, we are people of hope.

First Peter not only proclaims the hope we have as Christians but also tells us how we can endure periods of challenge or suffering. First of all, the author tells us to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. In other words, acknowledge that you don't have all the answers nor can you fix all the problems. Let go of self-sufficiency and trust that God's love for humanity is more powerful than you are. God's work in building a kingdom of love extends through history and infinitely into the future. Lean into the assurance of knowing God's got this. You don't have to.

Humbling yourself before God doesn't mean thinking badly about yourself or diminishing yourself. It means thinking less about yourself and more about others. You can contribute to the building of the kingdom by following God's commandments to love and serve others - especially those who have been treated unjustly, who are in need of food and water and shelter, and those whose voices have been silenced.

Because...we are a people of hope.

First Peter also instructs us to cast all of our anxiety onto God because God cares for us. What a powerful statement at this time when so many are feeling so anxious. We hear about it all the time. People are worried and frightened. They see all the changes in our country and its institutions, in the behavior of people with power, in the ways people talk about women and

people of color and folks with disabilities and immigrants and so many other groups, and it frightens and upsets them. Yet, the author of First Peter says take all of your anxiety and cast it on God. God cares for us. God doesn't want God's people to suffer. "Anxiety is like trying to carry tomorrow on your back while still walking through today."

Yet, we are a people of hope.

Imagine the relief of taking all the worries that are roiling around inside you and handing them in a package to God. Not only would you feel so much better, but you would also have so much more energy to devote to trying to change what is worrying you. No more anxiety paralysis. As Corrie Ten Boom is remembered for saying, "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength."

Finally, First Peter advises us to discipline ourselves, to be alert because evil is like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. That analogy might sound odd to our ears. Yet, the lion still prowls:

in the temptation to dehumanize,

in the temptation to despair,

in the temptation to believe cruelty is strength,

in the temptation to protect ourselves at the expense of others.

The lion prowls every time we are tempted to stop seeing another human being as fully human.

To discipline ourselves simply means to hold to our beliefs, our values as Christians, when there is so much to tempt us away. Even when all is well in the world, we struggle not to judge others, not to belittle or blame. We say unkind words; we do unkind things. And right now, not all is well with the world. There are so many opportunities to give in to the temptations that come with fear and worry. To hoard our love, to hoard our resources, to join in the rhetoric of hate that has become so common.

So, First Peter is saying "Remember who you are. Remember what you believe. Stay grounded in God's love and remember that you are not alone. Other Christ-followers are struggling, too. Find them, unite with them, support each other, teach each other, take strength and courage from each other."

Remind each other...we are a people of hope.

Finally, this passage of First Peter ends with one of the most comforting and inspiring verses in the New Testament. "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ,<sup>[1]</sup> will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

If you are struggling right now, maybe with what is happening in our country or in the world, maybe with the rhetoric of Christian Nationalism, or maybe with some private inner battle you haven't shared with anyone or a challenge that has left you paralyzed in your fear and anxiety, First Peter promises us that God will come.

“God will restore you.  
God will support you.  
God will strengthen you.  
God will establish you.”

“Not in fear.  
Not in hatred.  
Not in despair.  
But in love.  
In hope.  
In Christ.”

In the end, we are God's people of hope. Amen.