

Psalm 44; Romans 8.31-39; Matthew 14.1-12
In Suffering Be Thy Love My Peace
The Wednesday after *Invocabit*
13 March 2019
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka

+ Iesu Iuva +

I'd like to start off today by telling you a little by why this series. A series on Christian suffering, of all things.

And we're not going to talk about Christians suffering in far-flung regions. About the Christians we saw a few years back on TV so dramatically murdered by ISIS. Or those we know of who live under the oppression of the Chinese government. Or about the church in West Africa that lives ever more fearfully under the threat of Boko Haram. For such Christians we pray and offer whatever support we can. For our missionaries in these places we pray that the Lord's Word would have free course. And that many through them would come to and die in the holy faith in Jesus.

No, instead, we're going to talk about suffering that's much closer to home—your very own suffering. You may not be experiencing it right now. But it's sure to come. Even worse, you may be experiencing it right now and not realize what's happening. It comes in so many forms. It can be the loss of a dear loved one, or a terrible divorce. It can be physical illness. Or great loneliness and lack of popularity.

But it can also be far less dramatic. Things as simple as a job you really detest. A stressful marriage. A budget that always seems a bit too tight. I can make a laundry list but I'll never cover the water front. You know what your own sufferings are.

But, I suppose, the question is: "Why?" Why the series? Why focus on suffering?

It's because of this: your suffering is part and parcel of your identity as a Christian. You can't be a Christian without it. That's actually Christ's promise to you: "In this world you have tribulation." So certain is this that Luther can say that the "possession of the holy cross" is a mark of the church. He ranks it right up there with the Word, Baptism, The Sacrament, Holy Absolution, and Prayer. And when he talks like that—when he says that the "possession of the holy cross" is a mark of the church he doesn't mean Christ's holy cross. He means the cross laid upon you as a Christian. If you have been redeemed by Christ the crucified, you will be transformed to the image of His suffering. And His death.

That doesn't mean you should go out and look for it. Believe me. It'll find you.

What it does mean is that you should expect it at every turn.

What it does mean is that when it comes you should not let it shake your faith in Him who has redeemed from this valley of sorrow.

Above all, what it does mean is that you belong to Christ. So that you can say, "if I am baptized, even though I suffer know that I am Christ's and He is mine. No, better yet, *because* I suffer I know that I am Christ's and He is mine." And in suffering be undaunted.

And so over the course of Lent, with the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ in view—His sufferings and death for the sin of the world—we take up this topic of the suffering of His Church. Which is to say, we take up this topic of *your* suffering.

Each Wednesday we'll have a different psalm of lament. When you have trial and tribulation, these are the words you pray!

Each Wednesday we'll also hear from the Scriptures on how to think about your suffering.

And each Wednesday we'll take a look at the suffering of one of the great heroes of the faith. They are saints of God. And if saints, then examples to you when you, too, inevitably suffer.

And today, in the brief time that's left, we take up St. John the Baptist.

How black do you think his world had grown? He had drawn the attention of Herod because his message was a message of repentance. "We have not forgotten You! And we have not been false to Your covenant! Our heart has not turned back; our steps have not departed from Your way!"

And the life Herod and Herodias lived, well, it was just the kind of life to repent of. Against God's Law she had divorced her husband Herod II and gotten married to his brother, Herod Antipas, the Herod we read of, while her former husband still lived. John's call to repentance stung. Mind you, even as John called for repentance of sin, he nevertheless pointed to the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. But to have Christ you must be sinner. And Herodias didn't want to be a sinner.

And so she had John thrown in prison. "You have rejected us and disgraced us.... You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us."

That's dark enough. But then at a party her husband Herod threw one day Herod offered Herodias daughter anything she wanted. And after consulting with her mother, she replied, "The head of John the Baptist."

And feeling compelled to keep his word, in spite of its rashness and in spite of the injustice of what he was asked to do, Herod had John beheaded.

"For Your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

And his head gruesomely presented to Herodias on a platter. "Awake! Why are You sleeping, O Lord?"

That, finally, is how it looks in the depths of Christian suffering—as if the Lord has gone to sleep. It'll appear that way to you. And everyone else who sees it will think the same thing.

But that's *exactly* where faith goes to work. In suffering, faith owns the suffering.... Faith owns the suffering not as cruel happenstance, but as a mark and sign of belonging to Christ and being called His own. And therefore faith looks at suffering and counts it not as curse, but as blessing from the Lord.

Of course, the devil, the world and even your flesh don't want you to see it that way. Where faith sees blessing, they want you to see curse.

But they don't understand faith. Because faith anchors itself in God's objective works. And in God's promises. With Paul it exclaims, "What, then, shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" And that's exactly where faith is exercised. And tempered. And hardened. Because even under cross and suffering, faith can let everything else go. But not Christ.

That's exactly what John had. Having nothing, not even freedom, He had Christ. And if He had Christ he had freedom from sin. If in this world he had nothing but its thankless spite, in Christ he had and possessed love from God Himself. If in this world he had nothing but death, He had Christ, the Life.

Which is exactly what you have, no matter the suffering, no matter the cross. Christ has made you His in your Baptism. And nothing in all creation will be able to separate you from His love.

Amen.

sdg
jsb