

**+ 1 Peter 2:19-25 + Living Hope Follows the Suffering Shepherd¹ +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 4th Sunday of Easter + 7 May 2017 +**

CIR HIRI!²

Suffering is uncomfortable. Suffering is one of those subjects that can make you feel uncomfortable when it comes up in conversation, especially if someone is describing it. Suffering ends up being something we usually don't like to talk about, but yet here we are...talking about suffering.

You came to church today expecting to celebrate Easter joy and the living hope we have in our risen Savior. Perhaps you even remembered that the 4th Sunday of Easter is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Those are fun topics to talk about, to sing about, to celebrate, but suffering? Your first reaction is probably not, "Yay Suffering!" In fact you might even think, "Didn't we talk about suffering enough during Lent? Didn't we focus enough on Jesus' suffering and death back during Holy Week? Haven't we talked enough about suffering? Can't we just move on to glory and joy and victory?"

That would be awfully tempting. I would love to avoid ever talking about suffering, but during these Sundays since Easter, we've been talking about living hope. We've been taking a look at what our God has to tell us through a man named Peter. Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering because they followed Christ. He reminded them that they had living hope in Christ. He reminds us that we have the same living hope in Christ. Living hope looks to the living Savior, who has restored our living hope. Today, however, Peter focuses our eyes on the Good Shepherd, who suffered as our Substitute and serves as our example when we face suffering. Peter shows us that **LIVING HOPE FOLLOWS THE SUFFERING SHEPHERD.**

"Actions can speak louder than words." That's one of those lessons parents teach their kids from an early age. It's a lesson you likely learned early on. We've experienced the negative side of that lesson. Your child tells you that they love you, but their disregard for what you have to say or their anger over the discipline they've just received seems to say otherwise. Your company professes to do things the right way in their field, but then your manager asks you to do something unethical to help their bottom line or to get around some regulation. A man, who is proud to be a lifelong member of his church, typically turns the air blue with the vulgar language that he uses as soon as he leaves the building. Actions can unfortunately speak louder than words.

There's also the positive side of that lesson. Your family goes through a rough patch—a loved one is really sick or financially things are in bad shape or you have to deal with a death in the family, but then someone sends you an encouraging note. Someone brings over a meal. Someone tells you they prayed for you or they simply listen to you or give you a much needed, though unexpected, hug when you walk through the door. All of that means so much.

Perhaps the shoe is on the other foot. Your neighbor, your friend, your loved one is going through one of those situations—and you encourage them. You help them. You share the love of Jesus with them, and your actions that mean so much lead to a conversation that impacts them eternally. Suddenly in the midst of their suffering, they have living hope in Jesus.

Peter was writing to Christians who were facing suffering, basically mild persecution because they followed Jesus. When they had first become Christians, their loved ones thought they were a little odd, but nothing threatening. Those Christians were a curiosity or going through a phase. But then those unbelieving loved ones started to notice how following Jesus impacted the daily lives of those Christians—and the pagans didn't like it.

Rather than join everyone else at the regular festivities at the local temple to whichever god or goddess was the patron deity of the region, rather than join in the immoral meals and practices and worship of those false gods, those Christ followers stayed home. In ancient times, that was dangerous, even treasonous! If someone didn't properly worship the local god, people believed that any misfortune that befell their region—famine, drought, flood, conflict—was caused by that person who had angered the local god. Christians only worshiped the true God. In doing so, they were being branded traitors who did not do what was in the best interest of the region or the city or the state.

¹ Some of the thoughts for this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Joel Schulz and Pr. Jeremy Mattek.

² "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" This is known as the Paschal Greeting, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, "Christ is risen!", they respond loudly and boldly, "He is risen indeed!"

So what did Peter tell them? Save your skin and go along with everyone else? It's no big deal because God loves you anyway? Suffering for Jesus doesn't matter? No, he urged them as ***“strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.”*** (1 Peter 2:11-12)

Remember who you are in Christ. Live in such a way that even if you have to suffer for following God's will, your life brings glory to Christ and may even provide you the opportunity to share the living hope you have in Jesus. Live in such a way that you do what God expects you to do no matter your calling. If you're a citizen, show honor and respect for the government, but don't use your freedom in Christ to cover up evil. As a worker, work hard and be respectful, even if you face harsh and unjust treatment. ...But Peter, isn't that unfair? ***“For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”*** (NIV84)

Peter teaches us a valuable lesson in those verses. God doesn't look at you favorably or commend you if you suffer for doing wrong. There is nothing commendable in his sight if I face the harsh consequences for sins I've committed. If I have done evil, I deserve what I receive. Following the Good Shepherd doesn't mean suffering because you are sinful or because you've done evil. In that case, you and I deserve the consequences. Yet following the Good Shepherd can mean suffering because you are following God's good will. Following Jesus can mean suffering for his sake, which God favors!

...But how can suffering be favorable in God's sight? Peter points us to Jesus, the Shepherd who suffered as our Substitute. ***“For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps....He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness...”***

Now try to think of all those times when you've racked up consequences for your selfish words and disobedient actions. You have deserved the consequences for all your sins, but think back to what took place during Holy Week. Jesus suffered during those days, yet his suffering had a purpose. Jesus suffered for you! We deserve to be punished by God for all the ways we have failed him, but Jesus suffered for you and me. His footsteps took him to the cross. Out of love for us, he suffered what we deserve. He died our death. His wounds heal us, and then he conquered death by rising again. As our Substitute, Jesus won for us living hope and healing and holiness!

Filled with living hope earned through his suffering, we thank and honor Christ by following his example when it comes to suffering for doing what is right in God's sight. When you're learning to write, your teacher doesn't just hand out a piece of paper and say, “Okay everyone! Write the letter A.” No, you receive a piece of paper with an example of the letter A on it already. You copy that letter, and the more you copy it, the more you are able to write that letter. Besides serving as our Substitute, Jesus also serves as our example. We copy him. That's how Peter uses Jesus' suffering to encourage us when we suffer. ***“He did not commit sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth; when he was insulted, he did not insult in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”***

How is Jesus an example for you and me? Consider what our Good Shepherd endured! He was without sin, yet he suffered unjustly. He was unjustly insulted by his enemies, yet he did not retaliate with insults. He didn't try to get even. He didn't even threaten those who unjustly attacked him. No, Jesus entrusted himself to the Just Judge over all. Jesus endured all that suffering, even death on a tree, because his suffering had a blessed purpose and a blessed result. Jesus suffered unjustly so you might die to sin and live for righteousness.

So when you unjustly face suffering for doing what is right, for following God's will, for following your Good Shepherd even though people ridicule you or think you backwards or even make your life difficult, what can you do? Should you repay insult for insult? Should you try to get revenge, to get back at that co-worker, that neighbor, that classmate? Should you threaten to ruin their reputation or try to drag their good name through the mud and muck behind their backs? Should you make them suffer?

No! That's not what followers of Christ do! That's not what sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock do! No, we follow the Good Shepherd. When we seek to follow his will and suffer for it unjustly, we endure it. We don't complain. We don't get bitter. We don't give up—defeated by our sinful natures or Satan or the sinful world around us. No,

we follow Jesus. We depend on him who was insulted for us, who suffered for us, who bore our sins on the tree, so we could be holy.

Did you ask for that? Did you ask for Jesus to endure all that, to suffer unjustly, to die on a cross for you? No! So why did the Good Shepherd do that? ***“For you were like sheep going astray, but you have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”*** The Good Shepherd suffered to make you and me part of his rescued and redeemed flock.

Without Jesus, we're lost in bitterness and payback and sin's consequences. With Jesus, we have living hope! Without Jesus, we're easy prey for Satan, who prowls around like a roaring lion, but with Jesus, we're safe as we follow him through this life and through the valley of the shadow of death. Following Jesus, we are able to endure pain and injustice. Who knows? The Good Shepherd might even let you take more sheep with you on the road to heaven because your actions put the focus not on your words, but on his Word of life. With living hope, then, we follow our suffering Shepherd! **CIR HIRI!** Alleluia! Amen.