

Sermon for 7 Easter
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“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

I think some of us are really legalists at heart. We think that if we lead a more or less OK life, God is obligated to make our lives nice and easy. But St. Peter makes it clear that that’s not the case. He calls his readers “beloved” to let them know that their so called “burning” isn’t a result of the wrath of God. But he is also clear that the testing and the hardship in this life is the norm for followers of Jesus. The “fiery ordeal” isn’t something strange in the life of a believer. It’s normal.

In fact, St. Peter says, “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” This, of course, recalls our gospel passage, where Jesus says, “Now, Father, glorify me with the glory I had with you before the world was made.” And then he goes to the cross.

We have seen before how glory and suffering are sometimes found together. Jesus’ suffering on the cross is his glory. St. Peter now says that our suffering for the name of Christ is our glory. The early church learned this lesson well. They revered the saints among them who suffered unto death for the sake of Christ: the martyrs, or witnesses.

I find it fascinating that we have these passages this week. We are still in the season of Easter. We are still celebrating Jesus’ victory over death in the Resurrection. And we celebrated his Ascension on Thursday, when he told his disciples to wait for the power from on high when the Holy Spirit would come upon them. So we celebrate victory, we anticipate power; but in the midst of all that, we are reminded that prosperity is not the essence of the gospel. Martyrdom is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We need to recover an appropriate sense of what it means to be a witness to the one who hung on the cross. Victory for Christians is found in Resurrection, not in avoiding the cross. The Holy Spirit gives us power to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. At Holy Nativity, we have affirmed that in our mission statement: “To know Christ, and to make him known.” And there will be incredible joy in fulfilling that mission. But much of our witness may be through our suffering.

Unfortunately, many people who claim to be Christians do not understand this. Many are not even aware of the connections between glory and joy and suffering. And when there is pain in their lives, they assume either that God must

be punishing them, or that God isn't powerful enough to fix it. That's legalism and heresy, not a relationship with the living God.

The power that we are promised is the power to live righteously, to do what is right, in spite of the filth around us and the injustice that may be done to us. It is the power to live as Jesus lived and to bear witness to his grace and love. It is the power of martyrdom.

Ultimately, the power of the Holy Spirit is a power to place yourself completely in the presence and under the authority of Jesus. And when we do that, when we are fully his and not pretending to be our own, we will be able to joyously give everything for his sake, as he has given everything for us. And then we will know and do what is right.