



Faith United Methodist Church

Faith is a member of the Reconciling Ministries Network

6810 Montrose Rd. · Rockville, MD 20852

301-881-1881 · office@faithworkshere.com · www.faithworkshere.com

SCRIPTURE:

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Those of you who have been in the church a long time, please raise your hand if you have heard a lot of sermons from the book of Romans? How about Genesis? Luke, Matthew, Ephesians... how about 1 Peter? (Less. Not so many).

Do you know why? The audience and the language is foreign to American Christians.

The audience is a group of Christians who are being slandered, falsely accused, and physically abused because of their faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus. Peter probably wrote this letter in 64 AD, just as the persecution of Christians under Nero was growing. Nero was the fifth emperor of Rome who was infamous for his cruelty. The Apostle explains how Christians are called to transform their suffering into service to the world. Christ has called us to follow him in a world that does not recognize him. Peter says, we are resident aliens in this strange land.

The language of this letter is used to embolden the commitment of this group of “exiles... who have been chosen” (1 Pet. 1:1) to their confession and community and equip them with practical advice on how to endure and prepare for the inevitable attacks to come. Instead of addressing the disturbing facts-on-the-ground with feel-good rhetoric like ‘prayers and blessings’ – the letter proposes an entirely new way of being. It’s as if Peter is saying, let’s switch stories and enter into a new life orientation of being God’s own people who bless this alien land until Christ returns and restores it.

In contrast, the church in America will never have suffered because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Except for rare and isolated examples, those of us in the USA in

the 20th and 21st centuries have been allowed to practice religion without oppression. This freedom is written into the very document which our country was founded. And because some of us -- have not faced this type of persecution our ability to identify with the First Peter community and empathize with those who are oppressed has been diminished.

Until recently, being a Christian in America has been viewed as normal, good, patriotic, culturally acceptable, even beneficial. Being a Christian has generally resulted in things going well. At least this has been true for what used to be called — White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Being dominant culturally and prosperous materially, many Christians have come to feel at home — this is ‘our land’ and ‘our culture’ — and the assumption is that it will go well for us here. For those in the dominant culture -- this is not a foreign land and they are not exiles.

And if you are me... this can be my land; where my ancestors have contributed and built a country of great wealth and we are still be exiles.

But for the dominant culture the thought process has been the joy of being well thought of, and the expectation that things to go well. In this framework, poverty, sickness, death and suffering are the worst things that can happen. We expect that this Christian land will be wealthy, and that we will be wealthy and healthy. Those in the mainstream expect life to be comfortable, upbeat, and success-oriented and have developed a form of Christianity to support those ingrained expectations. To be a Christian is to be accepted. To be a Christian is to be comfortable. To be a Christian is to be maybe even admired.

That form of Christianity has focused mainly on how we feel and whether our felt needs are being met.

But there has been an impolite awakening for Christianity in America. It is finding itself to be irrelevant. The Apostle Peter has a word for us today. For 250+ years in America, the call to be a Christian has not been the call to be an alien. It has not been a call to be a sojourner or an exile or to be out of step with society. Rather, far too many of us have taken it as a call to be a respected citizen in the community.

And folks get angry when anyone treats our Christianity as though it's not the norm. "You're taking away my culture. You're taking away my land." They/we get mad because we've developed a Christianity with assumptions about dominance and prosperity, about being normal and fitting in. "This is our way here. If you don't like it, get out. Or in the case of some denominations... If I don't like it, I will leave."

This letter attempts to provide comfort and reassurance for those who face, or will be facing, persecution due to their commitment in following Jesus. Here in the West, where we usually place an emphasis on orthodoxy (accepted theory, doctrine, or practice), have assumed that the cause of the hostility toward the early church was **what** they believed. But Empire rarely cares what the masses believe, as long as allegiances to the ruling elites are not compromised. That was true in the time of Nero and it is true today. The early churches were persecuted not for what they **believed**, but for what they **did** because they believe in the love of Christ Jesus.

What did the early church do, you ask? 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 the conformity with the prevailing power structures.

- Feed the hungry!
- There are soup kitchens and homeless shelters who need your time and lightly used clothing. Manna Food Center, Nourish Now, Montgomery County Homeless Coalition and Helping Hands Shelter. That's our belief in action.
- Protect the persecuted! (Yes, you, Faith United Methodist Church, a Lighthouse Congregation)
- Stand for justice!
- Demonstrate tangible love to the oppressed!

And when we do this love thing and become disruptors of the status quo, the Apostle Peter reminds us: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you" (4:12). To live the gospel is threatening! Liberation for the oppressed is a direct assault on the forms of subjugation society legitimizes.

We are in this sermon series on Believe. Belief in Jesus Christ requires us to take action. Because love is an action word and Jesus said, the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbor. Believing in Jesus means my service is not for me and mine.

Today's word says to believe in Jesus means to be an alien in a foreign land. And I want to bring this concept home to this congregation. We have been invited to serve at the Scotland community's Juneteeth celebration on June 17th. Scotland is a Montgomery County community founded in the 1880s by

African Americans. It was a living symbol of how good our country can be at looking the other way.

As recently as the early-1960s, many of Scotland’s Black residents lived in condemned homes without running water — their neighborhood was accessible only by a rocky, unpaved road. As the land around them became an affluent enclave for White commuters. Scotland could easily have disappeared, the way so many Black communities that became prime spots for redevelopment and gentrification. But it did not. This is a community of resilience right in our own backyard. The text this morning is calling us out of our comfort to what we do in Jesus name.

The text says, ‘if you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.’ (1 Peter 4:14)

This text reminds us not to be domesticated, comfort-seeking, entertainment-addicted, prosperity-loving, security- craving, approval-desiring Christians. We don’t want to be that. We are not called to waste our lives just fitting in. May we choose to have real spiritual, other-worldly power in our lives. May we have counter-cultural hope fueling our love. May what we believe – when we believe in the living Christ -- be actionable love. And may it be so!