

If we had been in Jesus' sandals, what would we have done? Let me tell you what we would have done. We would have griped and complained. We would have organized a protest. We would have filed an appeal. And if any of these things had worked, we would have looked for a way to retaliate, to get back at those who had inflicted so much pain and insult on us. Do you know why I say that? Because that's what we're doing right now. Like sheep going astray, we're griping and complaining and protesting and appealing. But not Jesus. **"Jesus entrusted himself to him who judges justly."** For us and for all our sins, Jesus suffered and died. For us and for all our miserable failures to entrust ourselves to God who judges justly, as a sheep before its shearers is silent, Jesus willingly and quietly went to his bloody execution on the cross.

And now, so do we. God hasn't asked any of us to serve as judge, jury, and executioner to get back at those who have caused us to suffer. But he has invited us in the Lord's Prayer to ask for forgiveness *"as we forgive those who sin against us."* He even urges us to turn the other cheek. His Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write, **"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Ro 12:17-19).** Yes, the path paved for us by the perfect Sufferer is one of patient suffering, leaving everything in God's hands.

And so, Peter gives us one last gospel motivation: **"Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."** Marvel of marvels and miracle of miracles, in Christ God removed our sins and nailed them to the cross. In our baptism he returned us to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. We belong to him. And he did it all so that we might live for him—with different lives, better lives, lives of patient suffering, following in the footsteps of the perfect Sufferer.

Fellow redeemed, as the Lamb of God, Jesus suffered and died for you. As the risen and living Christ, he set the example for you. If he lives—no, because he lives—you can entrust yourself to the Good Shepherd. Follow in his footsteps. Amen.

1 Peter 2:19-25 – *If/Then...* – 375, 452 (1, 3, 4), 367
05/03/20 – Pastor David M. Kuehl – St. Paul's, Muskego, WI

We're still basking in the afterglow of Easter, aren't we? It was just three weeks ago that we loudly sounded the refrain: *"Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!"* On Good Friday we watched with tear-filled eyes as Jesus was nailed to the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But then, on Easter Sunday we rejoiced to see him come out of his tomb in a dynamic display of his power over sin, death, and hell.

But all that seems so long ago, doesn't it? How quickly the COVID-19 pandemic changed our focus from no Jesus in the tomb to no school, no work, no play, no social proximity, and all the other no's that have resulted from the governor's "Safer at Home" orders. It makes us appreciate what the Apostle Paul said to Christians centuries ago: **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Ac 14:22).**

What hardships are you going through right now? Loss of job? Reduced monthly income? Financial plans shattered? Retirement dreams gone? Kids at home? Helping them with homework? Doing their homework? Wedding plans uncertain? Funerals and burials changed in ways we never imagined? Are you sick? Afraid of getting sick? Are you suffering from cabin fever? Are you lonely? Do you miss the basics of human relationships, things like eye contact, smiling, laughing, hugging, and shaking hands?

Regardless of who we are or what we do, the devil tries to isolate us, like a lone lamb on the side of the road, to make us feel that we really are all alone. Then we become easy pickings for him as he attacks us with any one of a number of things: doubt, worry, fear, frustration, anger, hostility, impatience, and a host of other things. It's at moments like these that we need to perk up our ears—really perk up our ears—and listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd as he speaks to us in God's Word. *"Follow me,"* he says in our Gospel today. Fellow lambs and sheep in Jesus' flock, if he is alive, then we can:

Follow in the Footsteps of the Good Shepherd

- 1. It's a path of patient suffering.**
- 2. It's a path paved by the perfect Sufferer.**

1. Peter wrote this letter to Christians living in modern day Turkey. They were hurting and hurting bad. Putting it in 21st century lingo, they were being treated like social misfits. Around the water cooler and in the break room at work, they were ridiculed for their Christian behavior. When they got home, they were laughed at for respecting the government, for being faithful in their marriages, for being honest and forthright. They heard it in the subdivision and on the cul de sac on warm summer evenings when their neighbors were shooting the breeze. That's why Peter takes pen to hand and writes these words: *"It is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are 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."*

Think of it this way. If we complete a big school project on time, putting in the appropriate amount of energy and effort, and do it well, what do we expect? If we faithfully do our job, giving our all for the company, and do things honestly and by the book, what do we expect? We expect to be commended, right? But if we spend little time writing the term paper, putting little energy and effort into it, should we expect a good grade? If we scrape by at work, are lazy, or make up presentations on the spot, do we really expect to be considered for a promotion or a raise? Obviously not.

That's Peter's point here. You and I are called to be different, to stick out from the rest. We're not called just to sit back and wait for God to bless us. We're called to suffer. *"To this you were called,"* Peter says. When we're put down for being a Christian, we're called to suffer. When we stand up for God in the face of ridicule, we're called to suffer. God says, *"It is commendable to bear up under the pain of unjust suffering."* As another translation puts it: *"God will bless you, if you have to suffer for doing good."*

An Italian violinist named Niccolò Paganini was playing a difficult piece of music before a large audience, when a string on his violin snapped. He continued to play, improvising beautifully. Two more strings broke, forcing him to finish with just one string. When the applause ceased, he nodded to the conductor to begin the encore. He smiled and announced: "Paganini and one string." He placed the instrument under his chin and played the piece one more time.

Charles Swindoll once wrote, *"The longer I live, the more convinced I am that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it."* Think of Paul and Silas as they sat in jail in Philippi. No griping and complaining about their suffering. Rather, they used the "one string" they'd been given. In the midst of their jail-time, they *"prayed and sang hymns to God" (Ac 16:25)*. Now I might pray, but I doubt I'd sing! And the result? The jailer and his family were brought to faith in Jesus and baptized into his name.

Have we let the suffering caused by COVID-19 discourage us, jade us, and even immobilize us? My friends, because Jesus lives—in us and for us, we can make the most of the "one string" we've been given. Keeping time with Christ, we can sing even when it's dark. That's why Peter writes, *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."* It's so important that we recognize that nowhere does God tell us that our suffering will be easy, that our burdens will be light. No, he says, *"In this world you will have trouble" (Jn 16:33)*. Here Peter reminds us of two powerful truths. One, Jesus suffered for us, and, two, he's the perfect example to follow. We walk a path paved by the One who suffered perfectly.

2. If you've ever used tracing paper, you know what Peter means. Jesus is the model to trace when we suffer. Peter doesn't tell us to draw our patience freehand, trying to come up with something on our own. "No," he says. "Copy Jesus. Imitate Jesus." That's hard, isn't it? Our patience tends to run short rather than long. Our anger bubbles to the surface without much provocation. Our temper reaches the boiling point pretty quickly. We just don't like suffering, and we don't deal with it very well. The bottom line is that we don't think we deserve it. It isn't fair. It isn't just.

And so, we need to remember what Peter says: *"Jesus committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."* In all of Jesus' life there was no sin. Not once did he miss the bull's eye of perfection that God demands of all of us in his law. Perfect thoughts, perfect words, perfect actions—all his life through. *"Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (Jn 8:46)* Jesus asked his accusers in his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin.