



But Now ...

1 Peter 2:19-25

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As we begin our time together, I feel the necessity to announce that I will not be returning to Roberts this year. As such, this is our final opportunity for our joint worship to occur with me as lead Pastor for Roberts Memorial. I have been inspired by our time together, totally engaged in our joint mission efforts, and grown to love your Pastor like 'a brother from another mother'! And while I won't be serving a Roberts, I plan to continue in the process of racial reconciliation with the four churches, but now as a member of the community. So, for those who thought I might just fade away, contrary to the words of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who said, "Old soldier never die; they just fade away."; I say, retired preachers don't just fade away, they just continue to show up like bad habits! But that's a story for another day.

Today, we continue in the lectionary for Year A and another visit to the Epistle of 1 Peter where the write is again talking about suffering. I don't know about you but when I hear a call to suffer for Christ, I am not moved to say, "alleluia, let's do this!" Instead, I recoil, and ask, "Isn't life hard enough as it is without a dose of suffering too?" Yet when I think about Jesus and all he's done for me, I understand, although I 'm still not running to get to the head of the suffering line. It's just against our nature to want to suffer; we'd rather take double doses of goodness and mercy; am I right about that? Plus, when I think about the trajectory of the history for people of color, I think we've done our share; and I still wonder, "How did we get over?" So, this is the dialogue running in my head as I engage the text, wrestle with the text, and finally submit to the text. I see the image of Christ suffering for you and I because of the love set before him and without fault on his part. IN fact, we're accustomed to hearing, "He didn't say a mumbling word," indicating he endured suffering unjustly for us. Or as Andre Crouch penned, "I don't know why Jesus loves me, I don't know why he cares. I don't know why he sacrificed his life, oh, but I am glad, so glad he did."

But now, there's a call for believers to be pleasing to God and that may require suffering like Jesus. Following Jesus is the ultimate test of our discipleship. Being abused and not returning to the abuse; when exposed to suffering, not threatening to do harm to the other, but rather trusting God in all things. Why? I am glad you asked.

The context of these words is that they lived under a repressive regime, the roman Empire. As such, not just state sponsored persecution but local alienation worked to create an environment that proved unsafe for some. The suspicion toward this group of believers was sufficient to warrant not just this letter but also the Epistle to the Roman church. Imagine being persecuted for your faith, if you will. This is the apparent climate these followers of Christ endured. Their response is to be exemplary in their behavior and a witness to the salvific work of Christ to the community around them. They were being called to a different standard; one of

holiness in words and actions. Their hope was totally in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as they were being transformed into a community of righteousness.

The formula for this life is that Jesus bore their sin on the cross, then by the stripes of Christ, they were healed of sin and being free of sin, are called to live accordingly. That seems like a tall order from my point of view. But before we dismiss the argument, let's see what that life might look like.

The text is not calling for a perfect life, but one of peaceful coexistence with the community beyond. That would include respect for all persons, including slaves and the emperor equally; love for other believers; and trusting fully in God.

Finally in an allusion to sheep and their shepherd, a warning to not go astray. Acknowledging that we are prone to wander from the fold of God, there's an admonition to return to the guardian of the soul. In fact, there's a clam on their lives because they have already returned and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who will not abandon them in their waywardness.

They were without a shepherd to lead or guide them, but now there's One who is able to guide them to a place of peaceful existence, like a pasture for the sheep, that is equipped not just with water, but now the renewing waters of life.

They were without anyone to provide a light for their paths, but now they have someone who will lead them to the right paths, the places where peace, grace, and love abound.

They had no one to lead them through the dangerous places in life, but now there is someone who will walk with them even through the valley of death! And not only to their death, but now someone who promises to return to claim his own.

They had no one to provide comfort and the absence of fear, but now, with rod and staff, this shepherd will lead.

They had no one to provide sustenance in hard times, but now, there is One who prepares a table for them even in the presence of their enemies. He says, "Come and eat, but bring no money for I will provide."

There was no anointing in our lives to enable righteous living, but now there's one who will anoint our lives with the Holy Spirit and allow your cup and my cup to overflow. My cup overflows with mercy, forgiveness, and grace. I don't know about you, but my cup has run over. I don't deserve it, you can't buy it, but goodness and mercy follow us everywhere.

And because of that, our place in God's house is secure. If we want it. I want to dwell with God forever, and I want it for you also. But now, you must put off selfishness ... but now, you must put aside hate ... but now, you must put off deceitfulness ... but now, you must walk in love ... but now, you must serve God and the people of God ... but now, as the elders say to you, you must walk right, you must talk right! They meant, live the life you talk about and talk about being hypocritical ... but now, put on Christ!