

Scriptures: Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

The Ascension

Earlier this week, on May 18, the Church celebrated the Ascension. It's a holiday to remember Jesus' departure – going up into Heaven – forty days after His Resurrection. It's been celebrated by the Church since at least 400 AD. We heard that story from Acts 1, in our first Scripture reading this morning. The Ascension is an important holiday for the Church. If Jesus would have not gone up into Heaven, the Holy Spirit wouldn't have come down at Pentecost. Christ needed to go, so the Spirit could come. Next week, roughly ten days after the Ascension, we'll celebrate Pentecost – the birthday of the Church, with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Today we're going to wrap up our time with Peter. He may show up once in a while over the remainder of the course of the Church year, but we won't be reading any more of his writing together during this season. I encourage you to take a couple weeks to read through the second letter he wrote – it's much shorter, and deals with many of the same topics he talks about in his first letter. This morning we're going to look at a couple verses in the middle of 1 Peter 4, and then skip ahead and read a few verses from the middle of 1 Peter 5. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to 1 Peter 4:12-14, and 5:6-11. I'm reading from the 1996 New International Version this morning. **Read 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11.**

Well, friends, I want to start talking today about the passage we just looked at, by saying this. You know, the NIV Bible, like most other Bibles, has been revised in recent years. It went through a revision in 2010 or 2011. That revision was based on new research, new archaeological discoveries in the Holy Land, and included the discovery of copies of additional manuscript fragments. That's a good thing. Bible scholars are taking the discoveries being made, and using them to improve the accuracy of the Scriptures, to give us greater clarity. There are folks who would sharply disagree with me on this. It boils down to a matter of preference. The best Bible version is the one you're going to pick up and read on a daily basis.

There are a lot of people in the Church who think the whole Bible miraculously fluttered down out of Heaven from the hand of God Almighty. I used to think that about the Bible. The Bible was written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit over the course of roughly 3,000 years, and what we have today is in large part what the ancient Church had roughly 100 years after Jesus returned to Heaven, as far as book titles go. What I mean is, we have the same books that the ancient church fathers and mothers studied. Theirs were of course written on scrolls made of dried animal skins, which over time disintegrates.

Fiery Ordeal of the Ancient Church

The Church, once Christianity became the State religion of Rome under Constantine the Great, around 300 AD, started mass producing copies – by hand – of the original manuscripts, and these are mostly what we have to base research on today. That's probably more of a history lesson than you had hoped for on a Sunday morning! My version, from 1996, reads, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you," (NIV, 1996) for verse 12. The updated version reads, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you," (1 Pet. 4:12, NIV, 2010).

The revision makes great sense, given who wrote it, what his situation was at the time, and what was going on in the world around him. Peter wrote the letter – he actually dictated the letter to Silas – from his prison cell in Rome. This was written roughly 30 years after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Nero was Emperor of Rome at the time. History records that Nero set Rome on fire, and burned down a large part of the city. He blamed it on the Christians, and then had the Roman Senate give him power to persecute the Christians in Rome. I've told you before what Nero did to Christians.

He would hunt them down, find them, and force them to fight wild animals in the Coliseum. He would impale some of them along the roadways. He tied them up in groups of threes to posts in his backyard on Palatine Hill, would slather them with oil, and light them on fire for his evening parties. Nero took Christians – beacons of the Light of Christ in the world – and set them on fire. Talk about fiery ordeals! Nero was crazy! Peter knew this stuff was going on when he wrote the letters. I'm convinced that Nero's parties are precisely what Peter's writing about here.

Blessed in Our Suffering

In other words, Peter's telling the ancient church, and us, "Don't be surprised by what people do to you for following Jesus Christ." He goes on. "But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed," (verse 13). Friend, if you're suffering for living out your faith in Jesus Christ – you can be certain that He sees that, and He's going to reward you richly for patiently suffering for His sake, when He comes again!

Peter elaborates on this – and this applies to us here today – "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you," (verse 14). Jesus gives us two commandments in the gospels, right? Remember what they are? Love God, and love others. That's what all of this boils down to. Loving God, and loving others. When we do that – and then when we're insulted because of our faithfulness, our loyalty, to Jesus, Peter says we're blessed.

We're given a promise here. We're blessed, and the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit – rests on us. Let's think about this. What appears more Christ-like – the person who knows they aren't perfect, who wrestles with temptation and sin, or the one who puts on a Sunday face, and goes through the week crabbing around, and gossiping about other people? Which person shows evidence through their actions that they're Spirit-filled? It's the one who knows they've messed up, who admits their sin, and who begs for Jesus to fill them to overflowing with His Spirit.

The crabby gossip, they aren't Spirit filled – they're too busy running their mouth to close it long enough to hear the Spirit speaking. I've experienced this, on both ends. I've been a crabby gossip before, and have had the joy sucked right out of me. And I've also been so focused on Jesus, and running the race of faith that I don't care what other people think – and that's liberating! So take heart, friends! When you're getting stabbed in the back for following Jesus – it's a blessing in disguise!

Fair Weather Friends

As a kid, I lived a pretty privileged life. At least Kendra thinks so. Prior to Covid-19 we got up in Mom and Dad's attic and took out a few boxes of my childhood toys, and took them up to our place for the girls to play with. These toys are figurines, like GI Joe, Transformers, He-man, and Star Trek characters. There were a lot of them. In hindsight, I was spoiled. So in elementary and junior high school, I had friends who wanted to come over to play – not with me, but with my toys. They were what we might call "fair weather friends." Have you heard that term? It's a friend who's only in it for the good times, and when the tough times come, they're gone.

There are a lot of "fair weather friends" to Jesus in churches throughout America today. They don't want Jesus as Lord of them; they're happy just the way they are, and they don't want to change. They just want Jesus to save them, and that's it. If they were honest, they might even be bold enough to say, "Leave the rest of 'me' alone, thank You, very much, Sir!" We can't be like that in our walk of faith. If we get that way – lethargic – it's no longer a walk of faith, it's a rest stop on the road to oblivion.

Notice what Peter tells us, when we're faced when the choice of serving self, or serving others. He writes, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time," (1 Pet. 5:6). He lifts us up. Peter goes on, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you," (verse 7). There's a lot of anxiety – worry – in the world today. I'll touch more on this momentarily, but I want to pause and ask the question – have you cast all your cares on Him? ***(Pause about half a minute, and repeat question)***. He loves you. He wants to help you, with whatever it is with which you're dealing.

A Toothless Lion

Peter tells us to “Be alert and of sober mind,” or “self-controlled and alert,” (verse 8a). Why? Because “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings,” (verses 8b-9).

While I was growing up, my mom’s Aunt Sharon had a little Chihuahua named Dinky. I hated that dog. He was mean. He yapped every time someone came to the door. When you went inside, he’d bark and growl at you. He’d even bare his teeth. He finally died when I was in high school – so he was probably 16 or 17 years old – that’s really old for a dog. Well, the thing about Dinky was, by the time I was about 11 or 12, he had lost all but two teeth.

He had one canine in the top, and one jaw tooth in the bottom – on opposite sides of his mouth. He still acted mean and growly, but he couldn’t hurt you anymore. That’s like Peter’s description of the devil here. He’s been “defanged.” He still has a bark, but Jesus yanked all his teeth out on Easter morning.

Some people don’t that – they think the devil’s as powerful as God. The devil’s a created being – he’s not all-knowing, like God. The way we deal with the devil – Peter says – is to “stand firm in the faith.” We aren’t alone! Our brothers and sisters all around the world are going through the same things that are happening to us.

God takes great care of us. He’s always present, and He’s always working everything out for our betterment. Look, He gave us His very Best, when He sent His own Son to die in our place on the cross. That’s the basic truth of the Gospel message. He loves us enough to take the nails for us. And in so doing, He calls us, like He called Peter, in John 21, to “Feed My lambs,” (Jn. 21:15), “Take care of My sheep,” (Jn. 21:16), and “Feed My sheep,” (21:17). Jesus Christ wants us to take care of others.

The North Star

There are a lot of hurting sheep out beyond our walls. We live in anxious times. In our world, our country, and even our churches, we’ve seen a lot of turmoil and upheaval in the last year. Division causes people to be hurt. Before and during the Civil War, fugitive slaves would travel on secret routes, known as the Underground Railroad by night. Yearning for a better life for themselves and their families, they followed the North Star. The North Star was a beacon of hope for them. I saw an email earlier this week from the Conference office. Bishop Palmer and his Cabinet have launched a program known as North Star Congregations. A North Star Congregation is a local church that’s prepared to welcome anyone whose church has closed or disaffiliated. These are places for our brothers and sisters to find safe space, surrounded by people

of peace who are able to care for them during a difficult season in their spiritual journey.

Friends, when I read the description, I couldn't help but think of you. You are people of peace, you've weathered the storm, and you have big hearts. Showing hospitality to others is your nature – it's your character, and sets you apart from other Methodist churches in Shelby County. So I emailed them on Thursday, telling them we wanted to be part of this initiative as a local church. Bishop Palmer's secretary emailed me the formal application on Friday. In the next day or so, I'll get with Tim Yinger, our Board Chairman, and together we'll sign the application, and send it back into the Conference office. I'm certain you'll hear more about it in the coming weeks – when I know more, I'll pass the information along to you.

We talk sometimes about the refugee crisis – Jesus gets that – He was a refugee as a young boy, in Egypt. And now we have people here in Shelby County, who have been displaced by the political machinery stirring up dissention in their local churches. We have fellow followers of Jesus Christ right here, who are refugees, looking for a safe haven, and a new place to call home. I know you'll do the right thing – when they come, you'll love on them, and treat them just like they've always been a part of this family of faith.

Jesus takes the broken things – the broken people – and He makes something beautiful from them, and He'll do that for others, with us here, as His partners. Several years ago, we went through I think three capital campaigns to raise funds to build this facility, and paid it off in twelve years. There was reluctance at first. But God wanted us to do a new thing here, and we did. He calls us to be renewed – to be changed – into better bearers of His image, for the sake of others. “And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast,” (1 Pet. 5:10).

I'm convinced that our best days, as a local church, and as a denomination, are yet ahead of us. If we follow the example of Jesus Christ in the gospels, we will be restored, and made strong. But it takes us being firm and faithful to Him. When we walk and talk the way in which He walked and talked in the gospel record, we will become beacons of His Light, shining brightly in the world today. And so, I'm confident we will enter this new season of our life as a local church with vigor and determination. The Holy Spirit is going to do amazing and wonderful things through us, for the glory of God! “To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen!” (verse 11).

Prayer: God of glory, Your Son Jesus Christ suffered for us and ascended to Your right hand. Unite us with Christ and each other, in suffering and in joy, that all Your children may be drawn into Your bountiful dwelling. Amen.