

“Suffering and the Unknown”

I Peter 3:13-22; Acts 17:22-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to your Spirit, to receive what we need and give what we can. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

There is a lot going on in our two scripture readings today. Which is probably a good thing, since there's a lot going on in our lives these days, even if most of it is under the surface. The broad themes of these passages – suffering and the unknown – feel distressingly relevant to our lives at the moment. While we're not all experiencing this pandemic the same way, and our suffering may span a spectrum from existential to minor, the emotions roiling each of our hearts are real and consequential for us, and God's comfort is for pains large and small.

So let's take a look at some of the points of connection between these two passages and our lives. The first one is kind of funny: Paul tells the Athenians that he's found their altar “to an unknown god”. There were altars all over Athens, most of them honoring one or another pagan god by name. The one that Paul was talking about was basically evidence of the Athenians hedging their bets. They didn't want to risk ticking off some god they hadn't heard of yet, so they made an extra altar in case said anonymous deity showed up.

We've been doing a lot of hedging our bets lately, as a society. Does it really help to leave your packages on the porch for three days before touching them? Do I

really need to sanitize all the groceries? Should I be loading up on vitamin C or B or D? There is so much more that we don't know about this virus than what we do know. So any remedy or protection that seems simple enough can get added into the routine, just in case! As long as this bet hedging is not dangerous, like ingesting harmful chemicals or medicines inappropriate to your condition, it can feel like an extra layer of security, as that Altar to an Unknown God must have for the Athenians.

But the next point Paul makes to them is even more important for us to remember in these days of life at a distance: God “does not live in shrines made by human hands.” We are struggling to keep our spiritual journeys on track without being able to gather together physically in our sanctuary. But though we sometimes call that building God's house, it is not where God lives. Our building does not contain God. Though we would never choose such circumstances as we're going through today, perhaps these weeks and months can be a chance for us to develop a deeper sense of the closeness of God, for as Paul quotes to the Athenians, “in him we live and move and have our being.” It's not that God isn't in our sanctuary; it's just that we must build up for ourselves a robust experience of the truth that God isn't only in our sanctuary.

If we think of Paul's call to repentance as a reminder of our need to continually turn back to God, no matter where we are or what is going on, we will find comfort, even if this God who we know loves us is still something of a mystery. Indeed, I am noticing that those whose religion seems to put high stock in certainty are the ones

who are chafing at our current circumstances the most. If we can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the mystery of God – if we can anchor our faith in a humble acknowledgement of the incomprehensibility of God – it will carry us more smoothly through these days of uncertainty.

Finally, one of the most important points Paul makes is one of the shortest; he mentions that God made all nations of the earth from one ancestor. No matter how we may interpret that, the conclusion is the same: We are one family with all humankind. We are in this together. We must look out for one another, all the others, not just our family or tribe or nation. It is with this declaration in mind that I want to now turn to the passage from First Peter.

As we explore this passage, it's good to clarify that where the letter talks about suffering, it's not likely referring to some of the severe persecution the early Christians experienced from the Roman Empire in other times and places. The suffering here was more likely sporadic harassment from a surrounding culture that was hostile to the lifestyle and convictions of these Jesus followers. For me, this makes it easier to feel I can apply these principles to my life, because I know my suffering isn't comparable to government persecution, but might be somewhat like whatever it was the recipients of this letter were going through.

One thing that is interesting about how Peter talks about that suffering is that he makes it seem inevitable. He's almost saying, you're going to suffer regardless, so wouldn't you rather not have to wonder if you deserve it? Yikes. Again, let's be very

clear that this pandemic is affecting different people in many different ways. Some are mostly fine with sheltering in place, while others are struggling to keep their minds and hearts in a healthy place in isolation. Some can afford everything they need, while others are having to wait in long lines for food. And of course, most importantly, some are struggling for breath in intensive care units or mourning the loss of loved ones without friends around to support them, while most of us still know only a handful of people who've been infected and even fewer who have died.

But here's what Peter's exhortation to make sure you only suffer for doing good makes me think of. Imagine you do contract COVID-19. What if you got it and you knew that you had bent those stay-at-home orders more than most people? What if you were lying in the hospital bed and having to think through which interaction where you didn't wear your mask right might have been the one? Which extra, not-really-necessary trip you made did it? Which other people you might have infected? Right now, for us, this is the exact kind of suffering Peter is warning us to avoid. If we do everything we can to avoid contracting the virus and to avoid infecting others, but we are still afflicted, we will not have the added suffering of wishing we had done the right thing and knowing we didn't.

It's so easy to live in place of being aware of the general situation yet still considering ourselves the exception to the rule. We are part of a culture that encourages us to take risks and make sacrifices of our own health, in order to maintain normalcy. We pretend that somehow it's nobody's business but our own

what sorts of risks we take with our own health, despite what we now know about how our own health can affect others' lives. We believe, though we'd never admit it out loud, that we can control our own health by sheer will power. When it comes right down to it, we just don't really think it will happen to us.

I'm not conjecturing these crazy attitudes or accusing anyone. I know we do this because I know I do it, and I'm confident I'm not alone. Perhaps not everyone does it, but enough of us do that we need to address it. It is a lie that our egos tell us, and it is not of God. And it would be clearer than ever if you were to find yourself confronting this truth on a bed in ICU.

We've been at this for 2 months now, and the only thing that has become clearer is that we don't know when it will be over. So how do we psych ourselves up to endure a weird new long-haul of uncertainty? As Paul said, we must turn to God. Peter has something to say about this too.

First of all, simply because it feels so appropriate, let's hear again those words from verse 14: "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated." Peter may be quoting Isaiah 8 here, which puts an even finer point on it: "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread." There are lots of people out there trying to find meaning and assign blame right now. We humans like to find meaning and assign blame. When we don't have better answers, one or both of those things are often our response. But as Isaiah implies, such responses are rooted in an attitude of fear, not a posture of faith. This is when we will

benefit from turning back to our God of mystery, our God of Love Too Deep for Words, the God Who Is Present in Our Very Breath. So take that breath, and sharpen your mind enough to sort through the information coming at you. Don't believe everything you hear or read or see. Consider the source, analyze the bias, weigh the agendas. "Do not fear what they fear," writes Peter. Do not fear.

How do we keep from being afraid? I think Peter's other exhortation can help us with this. This passage contains one of my favorite verses in all of scripture: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." It is the most beautiful description of evangelism I know. First of all, it makes very clear that our faith as followers of Jesus Christ should make us live our lives in noticeably different ways, such that people become curious about why. That is the most important step in evangelism. Secondly, it reinforces that this whole thing is about hope. Thirdly, it tells us not just what to do, but how – with gentleness and reverence. There is so much wisdom here.

But for today, for these strange corona times in which we're living at the moment, I want to give this advice a little twist. Because I think the person we need to have these conversations with – these defense of the hope that is within, this accounting for why we're not going to live in fear – the person you need to have that conversation with is yourself. This is how we keep from being afraid. This is how we

endure in doing the right thing, even if we're bored and restless at home and our masks make us sweaty and claustrophobic. This is how we talk ourselves out of the conceit that we are the exception to the rule and humble ourselves before our mysterious, loving God.

Because in the end, we do not make ourselves courageous. All we can do is humble ourselves. We need to remember our baptisms, that moment when we confessed our human weakness and declared our dependence on God, when we, as Peter puts it, "appealed to God for a good conscience." We are not in this on our own. Though we are distanced, we are not alone. Though God is mysterious and our future are uncertain, God is also as close as our breath and hope is eternal. When we turn back to God, we will be able to make that accounting to ourselves of the hope we want to stay grounded in. Let us proclaim that good news with all gentleness and reverence. Hallelujah and Amen.