

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

“Bad Moon Rising”
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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The sermon title is admittedly arbitrary – the title of an old Creedence Clearwater Revival song, which went

I see a bad moon arising. I see trouble on the way.
I see earthquakes and lightnin'. I see bad times today.
Don't go around tonight, Well, it's bound to take your life,
There's a bad moon on the rise.

My wife had a friend in college who sang the song, “There’s a bathroom on the right.” But no, it was “Bad Moon on the Rise”, a song full of grim premonitions. Something like our text from 1st Peter: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening...keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.*”

The language and imagery in 1 Peter is strange to us Presbyterians – not the religious language we usually use, roaring lions and the spirit of glory resting on us. Yet it takes us to a good place. Peter seems to be anticipating an impending period of persecution of the church, which we know happened in places early on. Enough so to use strong imagery from the apocalyptic literature of the scripture – the fiery ordeal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and images of Daniel in the lion’s den. His readers knew those stories and would have been impressed by the seriousness of what he imagined ahead.

It still happens. In the former East Germany, Christians were denied jobs, sometimes deprived of basic services, threatened and driven underground. In today’s Iraq or some parts of Africa, Christians may be killed because of their faith alone. Some Christians in our country trivialize the idea of persecution by using the word to describe something petty – the graduating salutatorian who claims to be persecuted when they won’t let her do an altar call at the end of her commencement speech. Poor baby.

We could read the newspaper and imagine all sorts of ordeals ahead. Economies reeling, war, environmental crises, hunger riots and a world-wide food shortage. But that litany is not what our text for today is describing. It is more focused than that.

Peter is anticipating real suffering for the early believers – *because of their association with Christ*. Yet he doesn’t point a finger of guilt at whoever will be harassing the faithful. They are God’s children too, and perhaps (like Paul) they will yet come around. But to the church Peter says their hope is in the constant presence of Christ, who promises to share his glory with them. *“Rejoice when you share Christ’s sufferings, so you may be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory...is resting on you.”* He uses the word “glory” 3 times in just a few sentences.

By describing the suffering of Christians as a participation in the suffering of Christ, we are invited to see our own lives as part of salvation history – our story as part of *the* story. Those things we go through, Jesus went through before us. In a way they are disempowered, or can be, because Christ is risen, has the final word for him and for us, and we are under the care of God. No suffering escapes God’s notice. And “*I’m so glad troubles don’t last always,*” as the old hymn says.

This is greatly different from the “prosperity gospel” which enjoys so much popularity. As Ralph Milton says, “*Modern Christians don’t face persecution so much as they face sedation.*” Lutheran theologian Martin Marty suggests that our religious practices stress too much a summery, happy-happy, joy-joy spirituality.

“Picture someone hungry for a warming of the spirit. He calls a friend who is advertised as spirit-field. “Praise the Lord!” she responds, as she picks up the telephone. The two meet in person. One is chilly but open to stirrings, the other well characterized as full of stir. What transfer of spirit can occur when he filled person is compulsive about the summer and sunshine in her heart? Never does a frown cloud her face. Lips once drawn tight in disapproval are now drawn tight in a cosmetic smile. ‘The Lord wills it.’ Never does the storm of a troubled heart receive its chance to be heard. The Lord has satisfied every need, one hears, so it would be a sin to stare once more at the void within. Christ is the answer, the spirit is warm and no chill is ever allowed between the boards or around the windows of the soul...is the summer-style believer being honest? Will she not have to face that void some day?... Must a person, to survive, choose to create a mental sound chamber that screens out the signals of the world?”¹

You’ve probably stumbled across some preachers, or little books like the Prayer of Jabez, which offer the idea that the Christian faith is simply asking God to “bless you real good” and that if you didn’t get it, well you didn’t ask right. That makes shallow roots for faith, so that when there *is* a crisis or tragedy, there is nothing to hold onto. Peter’s point is that our suffering ties us to Christ, and so his fate will be ours. His glory, says Peter, will be ours.

Shortly before his assassination by death-squads in 1980, Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero said:

“I have often been threatened with death. As a Christian I do not believe in death without a resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the people of El Salvador...if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty...a witness of hope in what is to come.”²

In the Gospel lesson from John, Jesus prays for God to glorify him (and like the other text he uses the word “glory” multiple times in just a paragraph. You wouldn’t think Jesus would have to ask for such a thing, so we ask what it means. Glory is one-ness with God, unity. “*Glorify me,*” Jesus says, “*with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed.*” He goes on, in this great pastoral prayer, to pray for those whom God has given him (and that would be all of us) that we may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one.

Peter looked and saw trouble coming. Jesus looked ahead and saw trouble coming. And in this prayer describes a oneness, a unity, that is a defense against it and the hope of glory. Glory is a God-given oneness with each other and with all that is holy. Oneness is in our spiritual DNA. It may not seem like it in a time when Christianity is fractured and congregations are splitting from their denominations. It may seem we have wanted our version of truth at the cost of unity, or our version of unity at the cost of truth.

The table itself, where we will celebrate the Lord's Supper today, take into ourselves symbolically the Body of Christ and so become the Body of Christ – the table itself stands as a witness to ambiguity, both our unity and our dis-unity, our oneness and our brokenness. It is that sign of our oneness with Christ. But there are Christians who cannot share the sacrament with Christians of other denominations. And as long as that is true, our table fellowship is broken and the church is not one, and disappoints (I am sure) Christ. If you are visiting us today, please know that the invitation to the sacrament is for all, and that Christ is the host at this table. The oneness at this table is a defense against trouble and the hope of glory.

When we share the sacrament at this table it is a sign of our lives and our future being bound up in Jesus Christ's life, our suffering his suffering, his resurrection our resurrection. That oneness a defense against trouble and the hope of glory.

When we come to this table, we are bound together with all who have ever come to it before. Here in this congregation, bound to those who committed to this city, this street corner, and stayed here when there was great ordeal, when downtown Birmingham was empty, and we were being invited to flee to the suburbs. And we talk a lot about the pastors, Dr. Ramage and Dr. Hay, and they were great souls. But what kept this fellowship alive were those who committed to stay in ministry on this spot, some who drove over two mountains all the time (when it was less easy to do), to keep this witness alive, with names like Teague and Plaxco and Moses and so many others. That gift gave us our oneness, and was in lean times a defense against trouble and the hope of glory.

Some of us are in spiritual summer and some in spiritual winter, some suffering and some not, some firm in belief and others feeling around for it, some long-practiced at Christian faith and some new to it and some wondering. And that is why there is more than one of us – together we are something we could not be separately; we are a people, a sign, a comfort, a witness, we are here for one another, a defense against trouble and, yes, the hope of glory.

Praise be to God.

¹ Marty, Martin *A Cry of Absence*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1983, p. 2-3

² Ellsberg, Robert *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time*, Crossroads Publishing, New York, 1997