

November 7, 2021
Sermon Manuscript

Willingness to Suffer for Righteousness

When we think of the exemplary saints from the Bible and church history - St Peter, St Mary, St Francis and so on - they are remembered and renowned because of particular ways their lives reflect Christlikeness. But we must be careful to remember they were not superheroes; rather they were humans just like you and me. The faith and virtue that characterized their lives was just the fruit of God's grace at work in them, which means that attaining such holiness remains a possibility for each one of us. So what stands in our way?

Well, **the sinful condition we were all born into desires (more than anything) to avoid pain or discomfort in our present, while keeping us blind to future consequences. This is what makes us so susceptible to evil, which tempts us to seek out idols who offer relief or protection from suffering. But one way God can bring good out of evil, is when we respond to the pain or discomfort those idols shield us from by turning to Him instead, where we can find the grace to endure pain & suffering for the sake of righteousness and be given the faith (or vision) for how the immediate threats of evil pale in comparison to the rewards of remaining faithful to Him.**

You know, one thing I've discovered about some of the biggest changes in life - so for me these have been getting married or pastoring a church or having kids - is that no matter what I've done to prepare for them or what advice people may have given me in advance, I really had *no idea what* it was gonna be like or what it was gonna all about until I was in it. I know having kids has definitely been this way. I have learned how foolish & arrogant it was to stand in judgment of other parents of young children, particularly before I'd had to do it myself.

I can remember before having kids I'd see someone out in public whose kid was having a total meltdown - in Target, or the worst was on a plane - and judgmentally thinking, "man, can these people not control their kids?" Now of course, going into the parenting phase of my life I was aware that babies cry a lot and I heard rumors that kids can absolutely lose it over insignificant things. But not having a younger sibling myself, I don't think I really grasped how *much* babies cry or how often kids may be prone to have meltdowns. And what I discovered about both crying and meltdowns is that I don't *enjoy* either of them. So when they're happening I'll find myself with the impulse to do whatever I can to just make it stop: to prioritize my comfort over the needs of the kid. The problem with this, of course, is I've learned that in order to raise emotionally healthy kids, their emotional experience needs to be respected, that I as a father need to provide space for them to express different feelings that arise - though perhaps not in the middle of Target - but so they can learn (certainly with fits and starts) how to manage them in healthy ways. And what this means is patience through and endurance of a whole lot of crying and meltdowns that for various reasons - of perhaps my temperament and background - I can often find to be pretty excruciating to be around.

So what makes it challenging to always accept my kids as kids and to be the father they need **is that the sinful condition we were all born with prefers more than anything to avoid pain or discomfort in the present, while remaining fairly incapable of considering future consequences.** This is what makes me susceptible to trying to control my kids' emotional life by shutting them down when it's uncomfortable for me - tempting me with relief from suffering in the moment without caring all that much about the future consequences. **But one way God can bring good out of evil, is when we respond to the pain or discomfort those idols shield us from by turning to Him instead, where we can find the grace to endure suffering for the sake of righteousness and be given the faith (or vision) for how the immediate threats of evil pale in comparison to the rewards of remaining faithful to Him.**

And, believe it or not, this is the truth underlying our readings from Revelation today. Our reading from Revelation 7 was appointed for All Saints' Day, which makes sense as it describes the great multitude of God's saints gathered from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing in praise before God's throne. But this passage really shouldn't be divorced from what St John describes in Revelation 6; it's all part of the same vision. And so I had us read that first.

As I reminded us last week, the Revelation was a book of visions written by St John and sent to a group of 7 churches in the Roman empire, likely around 95 A.D., in an era when believers were facing enormous pressure to compromise their faith and live according to Roman values. Remember, Christianity was illegal in the Roman empire, and in recent decades certain emperors had felt particularly threatened by the faith and persecuted Christians mercilessly. For example, Nero, who was emperor from 54 to 68 A.D. had "brutally murdered Christians in Rome by crucifying some of them, having others torn by dogs, and having still others born to death."¹ And while it's unclear if Revelation was written under an emperor who was using violence on Christians,² the beginning of chapter 6 uses Revelation's characteristic symbolic imagery to highlight some *additional* reasons Christians were tempted to compromise their allegiance to Jesus and the hidden Kingdom of God to trust instead in the promises of security the Empire offered.

The passage describes a total of six seals being opened to each reveal a separate vision. And the first four seals each reveal a rider on a horse, which have come to be (famously) known as "The Four Horsemen". And to aid my explanation of the horsemen, I've included a colored version of a woodcut of this scene on your bulletin insert (if you want to turn to it). It's a work by 15th century artist Albrecht Dürer.³ Scholar Craig Koester explains that these four horsemen represented what people felt as the primary existential threats to their physical well-being in those days.



The first rider (pictured in the back, on the far right) is on a white horse, who in verse 2 John describes as riding out "as a conqueror bent on conquest". This horseman represents the threat of conquest from foreigners, who could attack the Roman empire and therefore put everyone who lived within the Empire at risk.

The second rider, on a fiery red horse is pictured in front of the first. In verse 4, John says he was "given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other," and had a sword in hand.



¹ Koester p. 90

² Emperor Domitian (89-96 A.D.) was known to use violence against his political opponents, but it is unclear whether he particularly targeted Christians (Koester 32).

³ All of Dürer's woodcuts of Revelation can be seen at <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=books> on pages 11-26

This horseman represents the threat of experiencing violence from one's neighbors and fellow countrymen.

In front of the first two is the third rider on a black horse, whom verse 5 says "was holding a pair of scales in his hand," the scales of commerce. This horseman represents the threat of economic hardship. As the words of verse 6 proclaim prices for staples wheat and barley high enough to use up most of the wage of a small family, with none leftover for oil or wine.

But finally, the fourth rider, says John in verse 8, rides on a pale (or 'ashen') horse - pictured on the bottom left - and his name was Death, with Hades (the place of the dead) "following close behind him," who you can see in the very bottom of that corner. And this, of course - death - is the ultimate threat underlying each of the previous three. But also, as I mentioned, under some of the recent Roman emperors, death had been the major threat to the survival of Christians who were unwilling to be more loyal to the empire than to Christ.

And I'll get a little more into that in a minute. But first, I want to point out to you that *all four* of these horsemen were called forth from the throne of God. In verses 1, 3, 5, & 7, notice each of the four living creatures from around God's throne are the ones who call forth the horsemen. And this highlights the reality - the perhaps uncomfortable reality - that God allows a world where there is evil that threatens our well-being as humans and our survival. And yet, because our sinful condition wants to avoid pain more than anything, these threats make us susceptible to seeking out other evil - idols - who offer relief or protection from suffering. And that is precisely what made the first century Christians susceptible to shift their allegiance from Christ to Rome.

It just so happens that Caesar Augustus - the emperor when Jesus was born - had ironically begun a 150 year time of peace and prosperity in the Roman empire known as the Pax Romana, or the Peace of Rome. Ironical because Augustus' birth was recalled as "good news" and he was popularly dubbed a son of god and a "cosmic savior"; titles we would reserve for Christ. This peace the Empire purported to offer included protection for its citizens from foreign conquest, it had laws and a justice system meant to restrain violence among its citizens, to provide an a prosperous economy to shield against financial hardship, and for those willing to be loyal: protection from martyrdom.

So throughout the ministry of Christ and the first hundred years of the Church, the peace and salvation promised through Christ was set in contrast to the much more tangible peace of Rome, particularly under the emperors who demanded Christians forsake Christ to proclaim allegiance to them. However, this vision of the four horsemen shows just how limited Rome's offer was compared to the Lord's, because as much as the Empire deigned to offer protection from conquest and violence and famine, their ability to stave these off depended on the stability of the empire. And while Rome's protections might be able to lengthen a person's life, ultimately death still comes for everyone.

So temptation offered to Christians by the idol of Empire was to avoid some suffering in the near term and perhaps even enjoy some worldly prosperity. But John's warning to those Christians willing to forsake the good news of Jesus for the supposed good news of the empire was that the protection Rome promised from physical harm *paled* in comparison to the bigger picture benefits of remaining in Christ. And this is what the fifth and six seals are meant to show.

Unfortunately I haven't pictured Dürer's woodcut for seals five and six in your bulletin, but these verses remind the reader that that justice will come. When Jesus opens the fifth seal, it reveals the souls of all the saints who'd been martyred "because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained". And in verse 10 they call out to the Lord for justice. But instead they are "given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been." And what they have to wait for is the final judgment - when Christ returns - which is depicted with the opening of the sixth seal. Verse 12 says,

¹² I watched as (Jesus, the lamb) opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"

In response to this great day of wrath, all the kings and princes and general and rich and mighty attempt to hide and proclaim "Who can withstand it?" And yet the answer comes in the the next chapter - our second reading today - which depicts that "great multitude that no one could count" the ones who were given white robes, standing around the throne of God (v15) and holding palms of victory in their hands, showing that every bit of suffering they endured in this life for righteousness' sake had been worth it, as they find rest and reward in heaven.

And so, it would've been clear to anyone in the churches these visions were written to that they could not remain neutral, but to choose this day whom they would entrust their lives to: Jesus or Caesar - and what the way of living they would choose for themselves - the ways of the kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world. And what would determine how they would choose? Whether they had a character that hungered for righteousness and faithfulness more than avoiding pain & suffering and the faith to believe their present troubles paled in comparison to future rewards.

Now certainly trusting in worldly kingdoms and worldly power is a temptation we remain susceptible to as well; as powerful as it ever was. In fact, the idols of American culture & empire offers much the protections from threats to our survival and perks of this-life prosperity as Rome did. And you may wonder, "Well whats the big deal?" But whenever our trust in military might or a prosperous global economy or first world healthcare exceeds our trust & allegiance to Christ, then when these worldly idols are shaken by the 21st century horsemen of economic recessions & inflation, political division & instability, or a pandemic, it's going to shake us to the core, and reflecting Christ to the world is going to be the furthest thing from our hearts.

The sinful condition we were all born into desires (more than anything) to avoid pain or discomfort in our present, while keeping us blind to future consequences. This is what makes us so susceptible to evil, which tempts us to seek out idols who offer relief or protection from suffering. But one way God can bring good out of evil, is when we respond to the pain or discomfort those idols shield us from by turning to Him instead, where we can find the grace to endure pain & suffering for the sake of righteousness and be given the faith (or vision) for how the immediate threats of evil *pale* in comparison to the rewards of remaining faithful to Him.

But it is not only threats to our physical survival that undermine our trust in Jesus and faithfulness to Jesus (it wasn't just empire/govt --- it was idolatrous worldly culture). Living in a society like ours that has denied or minimized the reality of evil (as we talked about last week) has probably given all of us an unrealistic expectation that we won't suffer in life or that we'll suffer very little. And this collective lie we've inherited - that we wont suffer or shouldnt have to suffer - causes us to cling to our idols all the more.⁴ ...because casting down idols is painful!!!

⁴ Not to mention being stunned, or even outraged, when suffering does come to us.

As I said in the sermon on idols a month ago, whatever idols we have made, whether money, sex, empire, food, work, health, marriage, family, kids, politics - the purpose the deeper purposes they serve - the four possibilities - are to give us power, approval, comfort, or control. But all of those are about shielding us from pain and discomfort.

So for us to let go of any idol means letting in pain that idol has shielded us from, in some cases for a long time. Putting in healthier boundaries in our lives means being willing to risk the pain of blowback or loss of love from some people whose love we've allowed to become an idol. It requires a willingness to grieve, but many of us are terrified of grief. When we seek to make a change to honor God with our time or talents or treasures, this will probably require us to sacrifice and grieve the worldly pleasure we've been using those things for. As Peter Scazzero said, we cannot be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature. And in order for us to ever emotionally mature, we have to experience the pain now that we for so long evaded with sinful escapisms, but God wants to show us that in him we can not only survive that pain & discomfort, it will be worth every bit of it. And I don't mean just in the afterlife. No, all the holiness we can attain - every way our character and faith can become more like Christ - will be worth every bit of short-term pain and discomfort it may entail; not just worth it for us but everyone in our lives.

The more our faith matures, the less we will find ourselves trusting in the worldly means of security through empire and wealth and violence. And the more willing we will be to endure pain for righteousness' sake. And living in a society where Christianity is not illegal (yet), but that is all about maximum pleasure and no pain, these are *our* opportunities for martyrdom.

The sinful condition we were all born into desires (more than anything) to avoid pain or discomfort in our present, while keeping us blind to future consequences. This is what makes us so susceptible to evil, which tempts us to seek out idols who offer relief or protection from suffering. But one way God can bring good out of evil, is when we respond to the pain or discomfort those idols shield us from by turning to Him instead, where we can find the grace to endure pain & suffering for the sake of righteousness and be given the faith (or vision) for how the immediate threats of evil pale in comparison to the rewards of remaining faithful to Him.

So, for me my big challenge continues to be discerning where I'm doing this. I know I mentioned discerning my tendency to idolize peace and quiet at the expense of my kids well-being. But what are the other ways - the patterns and instances where I seek out idols to shield me from pain and discomfort? What sort of harm is it causing to me or others? And what sort of blessings are being missed out on because of my failure to be holy - to endure suffering for righteousness - in that way? And some of you may be in a similar place. So in a few moments I want to lead us in asking God to reveal these toxic idols to us or to ask his help to choose differently when we're tempted to use them to shield ourselves from pain. And after that we'll ask God in song to help us with all of this. And of course have the opportunity for confession for any new idols he may have revealed.

Lord,

Our spirit is willing but our sinful flesh is weak. We desire holiness, but can have so little courage for the pain or discomfort that attaining it can require.

But will you show us ways - the patterns and instances in our lives - where we seek out idols to shield us from pain and discomfort?

Will you give us vision for the benefits of living differently that we and those we love are presently missing out on?

And will you give us the willingness - next time we're tempted to escape in that way - to begin choosing differently, to seek the help of his spirit; before it even comes to be vulnerable with a fellow believer who can help us be honest about it, to seek godly counsel for new and healthier ways to live in a world where because of evil's existence suffering is inevitable?

In Jesus' name. Amen.



The Fifth & Six Seals (Rev 6:9-17), by Durer



The Seal of God (Rev 7:1-8), by Durer

Larger images are available at
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=books>