

Future Oriented

1 Peter 2:19-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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For the first time in a while, there seems to be some good news on the horizon. It looks like our province will begin to cautiously and gradually reopen over the next few weeks.

There is much that remains uncertain, of course. We don't know if easing restrictions will lead to a new wave of the virus. The timeline is still very much up in the air and dependent upon how each stage goes.

And we don't know what this will mean for church gatherings. My understanding of the situation is that public gatherings like worship services will be among the last to be allowed, so we may still be some distance from gathering together publicly.

But any kind of good news is welcome, because I think we have reached the stage of physical isolation where strange things are starting to happen to our brains.

For example, I have started cooking. You can ask my family just how likely this scenario would have been pre-pandemic.

My recipe repertoire was embarrassingly brief. I could fry eggs and turn the rice cooker on. I could boil sausage. I could put a pizza in the oven. Not particularly inspiring stuff.

But now, with all this time at home and not as many meetings to rush off to in the evening, I have started doing peculiar things like googling recipes and actually following them.

Nick and I made shepherd's pie on Monday (which was pretty good). We had a Korean bowl on Wednesday. We tried a kind of whipped coffee one day (which was pretty terrible, to be honest). But all in all, the results have been... not bad, if I do say so myself.

I've also started intentionally taking the long way home, particularly on my motorcycle now that the weather has warmed. I will drive down highway 4 and then meander back to Coaldale. My commute is normally twelve minutes or so, but now this week, it has been twenty, twenty-five, thirty...

We're all spending a fair amount of time at home these days, so perhaps we're not in any particular rush to get back there after work!

(It also doesn't hurt that fuel prices are about what they were in high school for me! I think it cost me \$7 to fill up my motorcycle this week.)

Apparently, I'm not the only one not in any rush to get home.

Naomi and I were in Save-On-Foods on Tuesday picking up a few things. We made our way to one of the appropriately distanced markers on the floor and we noticed that the woman in the line beside us was actually further behind us despite being in line before us.

Naomi, being the lovely and considerate person she is, asked the woman if she wanted to go in front of us.

"Are you kidding?" the woman said, grinning. "I have a house full of teenagers at home. I want this to take as long as it possibly can! I can stand here all night!"

We all had a bit of a chuckle at that one.

All of the preceding has precisely nothing to do with my sermon. I offer it simply as a bit of COVID-19 brevity. Perhaps you can resonate with some of this. I think it's important to laugh at ourselves during these strange times.

Well, from the lighter side of things we turn to the topic of suffering.

For the last three Sundays, we've been looking at the readings from 1 Peter. It has seemed providential to me that this little book has showed up in the lectionary readings during this time of pandemic when the church is dispersed and scattered, unable to meet physically, where much seems uncertain and when many are struggling.

This was in many ways the state of the churches Peter was writing to in the first century. As I mentioned last week, they were suffering social isolation and dislocation and sometimes even outright persecution for practicing this strange new religion.

Now, if you're anything like me, your instinct is to say something like, "Well, the early church's suffering was *real* suffering. It's a bit of a stretch to compare our situation to theirs!"

Yes, we're restricted from gathering, but we still have warm beds and food on the table. We have the Internet and can communicate with one another easily. We have endless entertainment options at our fingertips. We can take the long way home on our motorcycles and experiment with recipes in our spare time.

This is hardly suffering compared to what the early Christians faced, or even compared to what many people are facing in our world right now!

But even if we're not being fed to the lions or being forced from our homes or struggling to put food on the table, we're still suffering in our own way.

These last two months have been difficult. We were made for human contact and community and when this is taken from us, we suffer. And all this uncertainty—about our health, about the economy, about those we love—can take a psychological toll.

And it's ok to say that what we're going through is hard.

One of the things that suffering does to us, in whatever form it takes, is to render the future somewhat opaque.

Journalist Damon Linker describes what it's like to live during a pandemic really well in a piece he recently wrote called "When Time Stops":

Human beings live their lives in time. Our sense of ourselves in the present is always in part a function of our remembrance and constant reinterpretation of our pasts along with our projection of future possibilities. **We live for the person we hope to become.** We look forward to who we will be a month or a year or a decade or more from now—and we commemorate the transitions from present to future with rites of passage celebrated in public with loved ones and friends. This makes us *futural* creatures.¹

¹ <https://theweek.com/articles/909137/when-time-stops>

That was a new term for me: *futural creatures*. Linker concludes his piece with these words:

A life without forward momentum is to a considerable extent a life without purpose—or at least the kind of purpose that lifts our spirits and enlivens our steps as we traverse time. **Without the momentum and purpose, we flounder. A present without a future is a life that feels less worth living, because it's a life haunted by a shadow of futility.**

Ah, yes, the “shadow of futility.” This is the ever-present threat in times of trial.

What’s the point of planning anything for summer if we have no idea what will be possible? What’s the point of planning to get an education if the job market is so uncertain and I’ll just be drowning in debt? What’s the point of showering or changing out of pajama pants for the Zoom call if nobody will even see you?

As human beings, we need this “forward momentum” both to understand who we are—each one of us thinks of our lives as a narrative that is going somewhere—and to live meaningfully in the world.

Times of suffering threaten to take this momentum away from us.

There are many things going on in Peter’s letter to the churches. But one thing he is certainly doing is helping them to reinterpret their suffering, to see it not as an exercise in futility and misery but as a participation in the sufferings of Christ.

He is, in a sense, giving them back both a present and a future by reminding them that for the Christian, all suffering can be gathered up into the story of Jesus—a story in which suffering is not meaningless, but the path to new life.

For the Christian, all trials can be interpreted at least in some sense as an imitation of Christ himself.

For the Christian, all of life can be understood as an exercise in being retrained to look at the world through Easter-shaped lenses.

Everything about how we understand God, everything about how we understand who we are, everything we understand about what we are to do in the world is to run through the grid of suffering, dying, and rising to new life.

The crucifixion and resurrection don't just proclaim what God *did* but who God *is*.

Suffering love and life out of death aren't bullet points in an action plan that God implemented once upon a time to accomplish the goal of redemption. These things express the very heart of God's eternal nature, character, and orientation toward the world.

God himself doesn't avoid suffering but endures it and overcomes it.

This is our pattern because this is our God.

As Christians, Peter reminds us, we always look to the example of Christ.

Because Jesus' life of suffering unto death, not retaliating, enduring injustice was vindicated by resurrection, we can live into the hope that our suffering, whatever its cause, is *never* the last word in our story.

We are always oriented toward a hopeful future.

One last thing. It's worth remembering who it is that is writing the words in our text this morning. Peter.

During Jesus' lifetime, there were few of Jesus' disciples more enthusiastically committed to the idea that suffering, and certainly death should *not* be part of how God's kingdom comes than Peter!

It is Peter who rebukes Jesus for saying that he will suffer and die (Mat. 16:22)!

It is Peter, who hacks off the guard's ear in the garden when Jesus is arrested (John 18:10).

It is Peter who is in denial right up to the end, refusing to believe that suffering could be part of the story of how God is making all things new!

But it was also Peter who was the first of the disciples to believe the women's testimony, the first of the disciples to peer, incredulous, into an empty tomb (John 20:4-6).

And Easter changed everything for Peter.

Human suffering is now transposed into a new key. It is rendered meaningful. It is one of the ways in which God conforms his children into the image of Christ.

The empty tomb convinced Peter that suffering is no longer an obstacle to the purposes of God being accomplished in the world. It is the soil out of which hope emerges and new life is born.

And so, like the early church, we are called to do two things:

1. To bear our trials in imitation of Christ, knowing that God groans along with his children and all of creation, and that nothing we endure takes place apart from the presence and example of Christ.
2. To entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly, the only one who can redeem the suffering that we endure.

The only one who can bring life out of death.

This is the one we remember at the table, to which we now turn.

