

A sermon preached by Rev. Ken Hughes at Clarence Presbyterian Church on
Sunday, May 29, 2022.

“The Long Twilight Struggle”

The epistle known as 1 Peter doesn't make a lot of appearances in the lectionary, but perhaps it should given one of the letter's main concerns -- suffering and loss -- and its advice to Christians living through those times. And on this particular Sunday – the last Sunday of Easter falling on Memorial Day weekend -- we have the strange convergence (call it coincidence or providence) of several things that speak to this particular theme.

We have the letter itself. Suffering is at the heart of 1 Peter, along with how those trials might be remedied. Second, we have the occasion of Memorial Day, which is rooted in the ultimate suffering – death. Remember, this is not the day to honor veterans in general, but those men and women who died defending our country. And, third, we have current events: For the second time in 14 days, we have another American ritual – a mass slaughter of innocents by gunfire. So, our scripture is most appropriate. Although 1 Peter sometimes sounds awkward and outmoded, it appears to have a message tailor-made for the 29th of May, 2022.

Let's first deal with what is on most of our hearts and minds this morning, the routine suffering and loss caused in our own communities by gun violence. Every time one of these outrages occurs, a familiar chorus goes out: increase resources for mental health treatment; monitor unbalanced individuals or criminals more closely; and do something – or nothing – about the easy availability of weapons designed to do nothing more than maim and kill. One commentator, noting how often this happens in America, called it our “national script.” And that chorus always begins and ends with a phrase that rings more hollow with every tragedy – “our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.”

None of this excuses in the slightest the evil that lies at the root of these slaughters. But to feign helplessness, or to fall back on empty clichés, in our own house is worse than negligence; it is moral cowardice. Unlike some, I don't pretend to know what God thinks looking down on any of the locations where innocents' lives have been obliterated in our country. But I do believe that God does not condemn us to remain in these places made unholy by bloodshed. The scripture abounds with stories of people who have pulled themselves out of darkness and violence, with heaven's help and inspiration. So I find hope in the Bible's witness. But I do not find excuses. And so speaking to one element that concerns us today – our current lived experience – I call for us to take any part of our national script, whether it is mental health, security and law enforcement, or gun safety, and make it your own cause to finally end this plague.

Which brings us back to the passage from 1 Peter, where the first, and most striking, message is delivered right away: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you...as though something strange were happening to you.” Peter may have two things in mind with this remark: it could be a bow in the direction of universal suffering, which we know

is anything but strange. At the same time, the letter certainly offers encouragement to a particular population Peter knew was undergoing persecution, his fellow Christians. Whatever the circumstance he had in mind. Peter says don't be surprised by adversity – it's the way of the world.

Peter was steeped in the history of Israel's struggles – from its captivity in Egypt to the chosen people's brutal oppression under the Assyrians and Babylonians – so he knew suffering was a constant in the life of his own people. But he could have been thinking of events much closer to his own day, like the ordeals suffered by his fellow evangelists Paul, Timothy, Stephen, many others. Bear in mind, Peter himself is said to have been crucified in Rome. “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal taking place among you...” would have been right in character for Peter himself.

And he takes that thought and quickly places it in the context of Jesus' own agonies, as he has done throughout the letter. It is a fate you share with Christ, Peter says, and to bear the cross, so to speak, in Jesus' name is to be in very good company indeed. You almost hear an echo of Jesus' final beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you...on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...”

As we enter the second half of today's reading, in the fifth chapter, Peter is no longer talking in theological abstractions about sacrifice, but in concrete terms for how Christians are to conduct themselves -- how they are to behave and survive in a society that bristles with mistrust of odd things – like this Christian religion – a world that often lashes out to punish the outsider, the strange ones on its fringes.

Peter counsels his flocks, first, be humble before God. Make sure your allegiance and confidence rests in the One who cares for you and who has the power to shield and, if need be, to heal your wounds and injuries and lift you up and out of peril. So if you're anxious and worried, as you might well be, by what surrounds you and often intrudes violently into your life, seek comfort and consolation for those anxieties in God.

Having anchored yourself thus, now take responsibility for yourself and your community. Discipline yourself against temptations; be aware that evil powers are forever on the prowl looking for weakness and opportunity. Like a lion stalking a wounded prey, forces of darkness will pounce without warning, taking full advantage of the openings you give through inattention, laziness, and lack of resolve against temptation. Be vigilant and step carefully around the lures and traps laid before you.

To his prescription, Peter adds a note of encouragement: In your steadfast resistance to evil, and the suffering it sometimes brings, know that you are in the company of sisters and brothers undergoing similar trials; you are members of a global community and fellowship that knows no boundaries and no limits of time – you are truly part of that great “cloud of witnesses” in Christ. Such is the “priesthood, the holy nation” that God has called together.

So how do we take this weathered letter, and its fountain of advice, and make it ours? Well, as different as Peter's time was from ours, we recognize the commonalities, the eternal things that have not changed. Suffering, first of all. As permanent a fixture in the human condition as it is, it is never to be trivialized; for us to make excuses for its presence in many forms. Instead, having tethered ourselves to God, we are to endure spiritually and to resist psychologically and physically the causes and sources of suffering, some of which are of the devil.

Even in this posture of self-discipline and vigilance, we are to face the world with gentleness and respect, and also with maturity and balance. If Peter in writing this letter was drawing on his memories of both distant and recent history, we are compelled to do the same as we engage the world around us. With motivation as fresh as today's headlines, we have good reason to be disciplined and vigilant, for many are the dangers – of which Texas is only the latest reminder – we must confront today as citizens and as Christians. That's the present moment.

A little farther back in history, but well within the memory of many of us, President John Kennedy – whose 105th birthday, incidentally, is marked today – reminded a nation not far removed from global conflict that we are a people “tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace,” an observation that certainly is consistent with 1 Peter, and our own time.

At the close of that inaugural address in 1961, Kennedy made an observation that I think ties together the three themes before us today – scripture, Memorial Day, and lived experience: “Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

“Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are-- but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.”

Words from our own history, but they also are words resonant with the wisdom, the warning, and the promise of the letter we have come to know as 1st Peter. Amen.