

## In Case of Fire

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

May 24, 2020

In my first year of seminary, I was required to take a class on Spiritual Formation, where the class learned about different types of prayer and had to keep a journal about what worked for them, what didn't, how often they prayed, etc. One of the types of prayer we learned was "lectio divina," literally "sacred reading." In it, a person reads a story, poem, or verse, and based on what sticks out to them, they pray on it. Certain words or phrases in a given story or passage might grab their attention, draw to mind current or previous accomplishments, failures, struggles, whatever it may be. As I was reading today's passage, one line that grabbed me and may have grabbed you all was "the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you." The "fiery ordeal" the author speaks of is "persecution," but for us, we might think of something else.

One possibility of a "fiery ordeal" taking place among us would be the pandemic. The sickness itself is keeping friends and families apart. It's canceling plans some people had made months in advance with future plans into this summer and fall currently unknown as to whether they will happen or not. The government keeps extending lockdowns and "shelter in place" orders, which is causing restlessness among those who just want to get out and go back to life the way it was. As if that weren't enough, it's sparked heated debates on social media over whose fault it is we as a nation are in this situation, which sources are credible in getting our information, how and when the nation will open back up, whether or not this nation's economy will recover, and how best to "jump start" the economy. The pandemic however is not our only "fiery ordeal."

Regardless of whether this pandemic happened or not, one "fiery ordeal" that would have erupted and *is* erupting is that of the presidential election. Now more than ever, our positions as Republicans, Democrats, Whigs, Greens, Independents, whatever party you may affiliate with are moving to the forefront of our identities. Our stances on major issues like healthcare, immigration, education, gun reform, and so much more are being voiced and argued over both online and in the public sector. Regardless of who the presidential candidates are, people and

their posts are at their nastiest on social media during presidential election years, and it only gets worse as we move closer to November. Granted, most election years, we have the Olympics to keep us united as a nation as we root for the best of the best from our nation to “bring home the gold” in any of a number of competitions and sports. Without the Olympics happening this year though, who’s to say things won’t get nastier than usual or get nasty sooner?

Then again, maybe our “fiery ordeal” is something else entirely. Some of us here are or have been caregivers for aging parents. Some of us are dealing with children and grandchildren that are going through tough physical and emotional issues, feeling helpless in so far as we can’t fix the issue. Regardless, there are many fiery ordeals in our lives in this modern day that can make us feel hated, alone, angry, and that cause similar emotional reactions as the persecuted Christians in the reading to whom the author writes. Lucky for us, though, with the author’s acknowledgement of the hardship the audience faced, he also gives four instructions as to what we as Christians need to do when faced with such adversity, and perhaps these rules given to those facing persecution hold validity in helping us in our modern-day ordeals.

The first rule the author gives is “humble yourselves.” Think back a couple weeks to my sermon on being “living stones.” Those that reject others, they shall stumble and trip over those stones they reject. In other words, “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Now, I won’t deny that it’s very easy to cast judgment in the face of such “ordeals” as we presently face. We blame one politician or group of politicians for what’s going wrong with our nation. We blame those that voted him/her/them into office. We say such things as “The economy will fail because of this person” and “We wouldn’t be in this situation if that group just did their jobs.” We feel vulnerable, weak, lowly when things aren’t going the way we like or expect, and casting blame helps us to feel empowered, like we have ascended above our anxieties because we know why this is all happening. However, this is not what humility looks like. Humility would be to acknowledge another person’s freedom to believe and express their belief as being just as important as your freedom to believe and express your belief. Humility is acknowledging the humanity of those we elect into office and recognizing that, if we were in their position, we may not know exactly what to do either. Demeaning them, casting judgment against them, this is a means of exalting one’s self, and if the bible teaches us one thing, it’s that the self-exalting ones are the ones who get hurt the worst. As

I mentioned, this is a means of feeling like we have risen above our anxieties in the face of adversity. Here is where the second command given comes into play.

The second command given is “cast all your anxiety on him.” As Christians, we know the famous verse: “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy-burdened, and I shall give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” This command is sandwiched between two commands easily summed up in terms of judgment: “Don’t cast judgment” and “Don’t retaliate when judged by others.” We do these two things because we have anxiety, and we need a means by which to relieve that stress, that tension. We judge others to feel like we have risen above our anxieties because we know why they are there. We retaliate against those who judge others because they cause such anxiety, and we sometimes feel anxious simply because they don’t always “get what they deserve” immediately. As humans, we feel anxious in times like this and we seek ways in which to “lighten our load.” The best way I have found to do this is to go for walks. When I’m out on a walk, I’ve stepped away from those things that cause anxiety: fights on social media and the news, balancing the many sides of one’s life, etc. Out on a walk, it’s just me and God in Creation, the wind blowing around me, the warmth of the sun upon my face, maybe a few raindrops on my head, the birds and animals chirping and skittering about. Such moments help me to remember that there is so much more to life than those things that are stressing me out, and I remember that God is not far off watching this all play out like a TV show. No, God is here, going through this time with us. The reading today speaks of experiencing the suffering of Christ, this odd phrasing that reassures us that Christ’s suffering and our own suffering are not separate but are actually one in the same. They are a shared experience, one that we as humanity and God go through together. Therefore, seeing that bigger picture, we are able to give up our anxiety to God, knowing God will see us through this suffering just as God saw Jesus through his. It doesn’t end here, though.

Thirdly, the author tells the audience and us by extension “discipline yourselves.” In other words, we need to endure what is dealt to us, not retaliate. If someone judges you for believing one thing, the natural inclination is to get even, “an eye for an eye.” They brought you down, so it’s only fair that you bring them down, right? However, we need to discipline

ourselves. If being judged or having a loved one judged has caused us this pain, would we really wish this on someone else? I don't think that there is anyone who would argue that suffering feels good. Whenever we suffer or someone we love suffers, we want to fix it, eliminate it, ensure no one else feels it. Surprisingly, in suffering, we learn compassion. In feeling vulnerable/isolated, we learn the value of community, of supporting one another through the hard times. "Compassion" and "community," these are two common themes found throughout the biblical narrative and ones that the author of this passage argues comes out of suffering, out of anxiety and hardship. In being compassionate, in being in community with others, we are able to do the final directive.

Lastly, the author tells us to "resist the devil." He describes the devil as a "prowling lion, looking for its next prey." Whatever one's belief in the devil, temptation is very real. As humans, we pride ourselves in what we believe. If we find someone who doesn't agree with us religiously, politically, philosophically, whatever, it's tempting to try to prove them wrong, to feel like the more-intelligent being. So, we cast judgment by how we act towards them, say to them, or post about them on social media. Maybe we use derogatory language towards a particular group or person for the way they look, act, or what they believe. In light of the presidential election season getting into full-swing, there will be more smear campaigns on TV, radio, and social media, and it's easy to get swept up in spreading it around to support "our candidate." However, this "casting judgment," saying/doing things we wouldn't say/do otherwise, causing division, spreading hateful rhetoric, these are the temptations, the "devil", that we are called to resist. If we are able to not judge and not retaliate, we therein resist the devil, and if we resist the devil, it's all the easier to "give up our anxieties."

In the end, it doesn't hurt to remember that, amidst the "fiery ordeal" of the presidential race, the pandemic that's causing us to point fingers and argue, and any other stressors in our lives, we are first and foremost Christians. We are called to love friend and foe alike, to support brotherhood/sisterhood and friendly debate, and to mend divisions rather than cause them. This means not casting judgment towards others, not retaliating when we are judged, walking this journey with God, and setting aside animalistic temptation for maintenance of that higher calling given to us as followers of Christ. We all have the same calling, one that none of us is perfect at,

not even me, but that we are charged with nonetheless. Therefore, as we move through our “fiery ordeals” in life, as we move through the “fiery ordeals” of *this year*, we must consider these four directives in all that we do, say, and think. Only then will our charge as Christians “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God” be fulfilled. So, I ask, how are you doing in following these four directives?