

"Trial by Fire"

1 Peter 4, 5

There is a story about a construction worker named Ivers Sims who found himself at work one day on top of a crane 220 feet above a Cotton Mill in Atlanta. Unfortunately, a fire had broken out in the Mill, and gotten worse and Mr. Sims began to get worried, when the flames were getting more intense and nipping at his crane.

He knew it was really bad when TV crews came and starting covering the event. He later said, "I knew I couldn't get down, so I just prayed to God to save me."

He was only 49 years old, had a family, and so he began praying. Before you know it, like something from heaven, he saw a helicopter above with an Atlanta fireman at the end of a long rope coming slowly towards him with a harness dangling beside him.

The firefighter reached the crane and said, "Sir, I just came to tell you your boss said you could knock off early today"

With a live TV audience, he hooked Mr. Sims to the harness, and they both flew off to safety thanks to the courage and skill of this crew.

Have you ever been in the fire so to speak and wondered where was God?

It doesn't take much imagination today to think of what our metaphorical fire might be. A terrible disease which spreads like wildfire unless we sequester ourselves. Or, the fire might be our finances, devastated by the economic slowdown. Or it might be something lingering in our lives, a moral failing, a mistake we can't forgive ourselves for. It could be the suffering of our children or grandchildren.

You might know the name Reynolds Price, a writer, poet who was once called the literary voice of the South. He was popular in North Carolina, as a writer and professor, but later in life he suffered from a cancer of the spine that left him somewhat paralyzed. Still he was able to keep faithful and continue his work.

This prompted a young student to write him a letter, as he had been also diagnosed with a terrible disease. The young man was shaken in his life and faith. It was an honest and emotional letter.

Reynolds Price summed up the essence of the young man's dilemma this way: "Is there a God, and if so, does he care for us?" These are the questions of anyone who is going through the fire. Where is God when we most need God?

How to respond to this heartfelt letter, Price wondered? He felt an urgent need to put his other work aside and develop his answer to these cosmic questions. He began with some lectures, which grew into a series, which grew into a short book. It is called "Letter to a Man in the Fire"¹

In it he tries to address the meaning of life and the young man's need for consolation, and the role of faith in all of it.

Some quotes from that: Price writes:
"but I feel some thanks that the even harder questions you ask have pressed on me a need to think my way again...into the bottomless mystery of suffering...what I hear you asking is this: Was our universe created by an intelligent power, and if so, is the creator conscious of its creatures and concerned for their lives?"²

¹ Price, Reynolds, "Letter to a Man in the Fire", Touchstone, New York, NY 1999

² Price, Ibid

Price concludes this way:

"what I assert with no serious doubt is that our universe was created and maintained by a single divine intelligence who still exists and who continues to oversee his primeval handiwork."³

It is a book of compassion and strength from the professor.

I imagine the first letter of Peter we read from today was also received as a strong letter of encouragement and compassion as well. It was sent to early Christians in the area of Asia minor who were struggling in all sorts of ways.

He tells them, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."

Peter explains to them, "It is a test of your faith, a trial by fire that will lead to praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

A Trial by Fire.

Now to be sure, this was about early followers of the Way who were verbally abused, made social outcasts, or worse because of their beliefs. This was about persecution. But it could surely apply to a broader circumstance, for those in the midst of any kind of suffering, struggle or pain. Anyone who begins to wonder, "Where is God in all of this?"

We can see two important ideas from this letter of inspiration from Peter the Rock - Peter the disciple:

1, When God seems most absent is when God is most present.

³ Price, Ibid

Peter tells us that the last thing we should do when we are in a fire is fall for the lie that God is absent. Peter, with personal experience, says God's apparent absence only is a sign of God's patience.

Eugene Peterson translated some of 2 Peter in light of God's patience:

"So my dear friends since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and in peace. Interpret our Master's patient restraint for what it is: salvation!"⁴

God is not absent, Peter explains, God is patiently with us as we grow and mature through difficulty, obstacles and even suffering.

There is an Old Testament story that was a favorite of lots of young Sunday School kids - those three characters in the book of Daniel who are literally thrown in the fire by King Nebuchadnezzar? They were not burned and when the King's men looked in to see them, they thought they saw 4 figures, not 3, one of which seemed as a God to them. God was with them in the fire. When God seems absent, God is present.

Even though it is our human curiosity to ask "why", Peter tells us to look at our situation and simply see God with us.

So during this crisis people are experiencing different levels of the fire. Some are in grief over lost jobs, or ability to move freely, or missing church or entertainment activities. We were talking this week about naming the grief that people feel because singing, especially in church has been called out as a dangerous act of expelling virus. These are all legitimate, and cannot be downplayed.

⁴ Peterson, Eugene, *The Message* translation of the Bible.

But as we have been emphasizing each week it seems, we also see people doing God's work of compassion and caring in very creative ways. Some very subtle - like this lighter side story:

Something new has happened in our tv news and information and opinion stations - they all, like us, have to find a way to broadcast from home. A side effect of this has been that a national audience gets to see these commentators from their own homes or living rooms. After a few weeks of this, competition started. A twitter rating site sprang up, rating people's room on a scale of 0 - 10 stars: 10 if it was a perfect backdrop, or 0 if it was not. This became a source of a lot of humor, much needed now as pundits started filling their room with art, live plants, dogs, anything to get a high rating.

Two of the most competitive people decided a few weeks ago to start a mock conflict about each other's rooms, and Steve Schmidt and Jon Heilemann this past Friday announced a truce, and invited everyone to pick whose room was the best, which one you liked, donate for a t-shirt and all of the proceeds would go to the Navajo nation to battle the virus and provide PPE and economic relief for a hard hit community.

So with humor and actual monetary assistance, some healing is happening in a way none of us could have imagined even 3 months ago.

People are doing God's work in new and different ways. When God seems absent God is most present.

2, God is powerful but unpredictable and mysterious.

One of the things about this pandemic we keep coming back to is that so much is still unknown. Lack of answers and information leads to fear and

misinformation. When you are in a fire, you want answers.

Whether our trial by fire is a disease, or a lockdown, or emotional turmoil or just confusion about the divine plan - it defies easy answers.

My Father in law was a great guy, who when we were younger and having struggles would tell us: "Maturity is being able to handle ambiguity."

Peter, though, tells us that God is powerful, concerned for our lives even if we feel confusion, suffering or stress.

Whatever we face, God desires the best for us.

It is still graduation season. As tough as this year is, it can't be any harder than in 1995 when a young lady had to deliver a commencement address for Columbine High School. That community has suffered with unanswerable questions and pain.

The graduating senior was able in her speech to compare Columbine to the stained-glass windows at an English chapel that was threatened by WWII bombers. Area residents took the windows apart, before they were harmed, numbered the pieces and after the war, lovingly put them back together and rebuilt the window.

She said, "The chapel made it through the war, but still visible between the replaced fragments of the windows are the lines where the pieces are broken then put back together."

Sometimes things are broken, in pieces. But God through Christ can put it back together again and the lines between the pieces of glass show the healing power of God.

James Stewart of Edinburgh Scotland put it another way. He was comforting a person who had lost a spouse - he said: "When you pray with your strong faith, you hold on to the left hand of the Risen Christ. Your husband who has gone on before you now holds on to the right hand of the Risen Christ. In the meantime, Christ is your bridge. Hold fast to him."

In spite of the unanswered questions, the occasional sense of fear and anxiety that creeps into our thoughts, our Lord Jesus Christ will hold us together through the fiery ordeal, even this one. We will get through it. God's fire is a purifying fire, making us stronger in the long run. What kind of people, what kind of church, what kind of nation will we be when we come out the other side?

Jesus will strengthen us to emerge together to the glory of God.

Hold on to these truths, God is present, God may be mysterious but God is powerful.

And remember:

"and after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.