

**“DO NOT BE SURPRISED”**  
**1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
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A couple of weeks ago, I went down the street to the Dollar General store to purchase a necessary item for my family. I couldn't locate the item immediately, so I waited my turn and then asked the cashier where I could find it. She replied that the item was on a rack right behind me. I turned, secured the item, and then turned back toward the checkout counter. Well, someone else had moved up quickly and assumed my place in front of the cashier. I stood there for a moment, hoping to hold my place in line. At that point the man behind me motioned to the back of the line and barked at me, "The line starts there. You're not special."

Mind you, I was wearing a mask; I was at least six feet away from any other human being in the store; and I was not cutting in line because I had just been at the head of the line. I thought the man's remark was unwarranted and rude. I tried to explain to him what had happened, but he was unrelenting. Not wanting to cause a scene, I moved to the back of the line and waited my turn for a second time.

The comment of this man that lingered with me was his statement, "You're not special." What he meant was that the same rules apply to me that apply to everybody else. I'm not exempt from the protocols of checking out at a retail store, any more than I am exempt from wearing a mask or social distancing. He just made his point in a cutting way; he made it personal: "You're not special." His comment stung for a moment, but I quickly let it go, figuring that he was either a grump by nature or that the stress he was feeling during these difficult times just came out sideways.

But later on, it occurred to me that this man's statement was true in a deeper way than he intended. He actually gave voice to one of the great lessons of the pandemic: none of us is "special," in the sense that we are uniquely immune to disruption, disease and death. COVID-19 does not discriminate; to paraphrase Jesus, the virus, like the rain, "falls upon the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). Yes, there are heavily populated areas and certain age groups that are more vulnerable, but this affliction can strike anybody, anywhere. And no one is exempt from the hardships it has caused even for those who are fortunate enough to remain healthy.

"You're not special." This is a hard lesson to learn because we easily think of ourselves as exceptional, one-of-a-kind, a breed apart from others. Americans in particular have cherished this notion throughout our history. For over a century and a half, we were "rocked in the cradle of continental security," protected by two oceans from foreign invasion. And then, along came Pearl Harbor, and sixty years later, 9/11, and we were shocked to discover that we were not immune from being attacked on our own soil. Even today, people still speak of American "exceptionalism," the idea that our country is not only different but superior to other nations, that we live under special divine favor and protection. Our scientific and technological know-how gives us the confidence that we can prevent any catastrophe and meet every challenge. And then, along came COVID-19, and America has been brought to its knees with some of the highest infection rates in the world. We're surprised that a nation with the most sophisticated

medical system and the largest economy on earth could suffer the same fate as countries that are primitive and poor. The virus mocks America and says, “You’re not special.”

This illusion of exceptionalism trickles down into our personal lives as well. The assumption we often make is that bad things happen to bad people – or at least to other people. Cancer may strike my neighbor, but not me; fatal accidents befall people I don’t know, not my own loved ones. And so, when you and I get hit by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we’re genuinely surprised. “I’m in a state of shock; I can’t believe this happened to me.” “I can’t believe this happened to someone I care about.”

Which brings us to today’s Epistle lesson from 1 Peter. This letter is written during a time when the early Church is undergoing intense persecution and suffering. The writer refers to the “fiery ordeal that is taking place among you . . .” (1 Peter 4:12a). This may be an allusion to the burning of Rome in 64 AD, when the emperor Nero scapegoats the Roman Christians for starting the fire and then turns them into torchlights on the city streets.

The text also speaks of being “reviled for the name of Christ” (4:14) and warns that one may “suffer as a Christian” (v. 16). This is one of the few times in the New Testament where the term “Christian” is explicitly used. The term suggests that followers of Jesus are already distinguishable as a separate religious group. It also suggests that they have no legitimate legal status and that simply bearing the name “Christian” is a criminal offense. A later Christian writer, Tertullian, writes in protest to the Roman authorities: “No name of a crime stands against us, but only the crime of a name . . . What crime, what offense, what fault is there in a name?” Back then, merely being identified as a Christian often leads to unjust, horrifying treatment by the powers-that-be.

Tomorrow, on Memorial Day, we will remember the women and women in America’s armed forces who have died to protect our many personal freedoms – one of which is freedom of religion. Sadly, in some parts of the world, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians are still tyrannized just like 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. But in the United States, individuals and communities are free to worship God as they choose and are also free not to worship at all. No one is punished for practicing one religion or refusing to practice another. Freedom of religion was established in America’s Bill of Rights to protect citizens from persecution for their religious beliefs and customs. We have not always lived up perfectly to our ideals, as many Jews and Muslims can testify. But by and large, the promise of religious freedom for the American people has been kept. During the current health crisis, bishops and governors can justifiably tell us not to gather for worship, but they can’t tell us not to worship. Today, we are still exercising our freedom of religion – remotely if not in-person.

At least in this sense, America is special, and the American people are exceptionally blessed – but only up to a point. As citizens of this country, Christians do not suffer religious persecution; but as members of the human race, we suffer in other ways that are just as painful and perplexing. This is why the Epistle of 1 Peter speaks with equal power to Christians in the midst of persecution and to Christians in the midst of a pandemic.

Now, notice the first thing the writer says to his original audience: “Do not be surprised by the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (4:12). What a revealing admonition that is! “Do not be surprised” – as if the

suffering of these early Christians catches them off guard; as if they expect something better and believe they deserve something better; as if they regard themselves as special, exempt, and immune to misfortune. No, the writer says, there is nothing “strange” about your suffering; it is part and parcel of the Christian experience as it is the ordinary human experience. Christ himself suffers hardship and physical pain; why should we expect anything different? As Christians, we need to get over the grandiose illusion that we are too good, too smart, or too powerful to catch a virus or get nailed to a cross. You and I may be distressed and disappointed that we have to endure suffering, but we shouldn’t be surprised. Suffering is a fact of life, no matter how special we think we are.

And then, the writer of 1 Peter identifies one other element in our experience of suffering that should come as no surprise – and that is, the amazing grace and power of God to sustain us in our suffering. In the face of inevitable hardship, pain, and even death itself, God to there to help us cope and ultimately conquer.

Notice how our text reframes suffering, saying that it can actually be an occasion for rejoicing. The writer doesn’t suggest that we should find some perverse delight in having to undergo pain. Rather, we should find within ourselves the capacity to view it positively. Meeting various trials should be done in a way that produces steadfastness and a refined will. There are even occasions when suffering should be a source of pride, because we are enduring rather than caving in to pressure. Some things are more important than death itself, like fidelity to God’s truth and faithfulness to those we love. Likewise, suffering should link us to others who suffer. We can be joyful in suffering because we “share in Christ’s sufferings” (4:13). We can experience solidarity with our sisters and brothers who suffer. We discover that our form of suffering is not unique to us. We learn from one another ways of coping effectively. Hasn’t this been true for all of us during the pandemic?

Above all, instead of detaching us from God, suffering connects us with God. 1 Peter tells us that the God who calls us will also “restore, support, strengthen, and establish us” (5:10). This is a crucial reminder, because the common assumption is that where pain and suffering are present, God is absent. Our text assures us that God is present with us precisely when we are in pain.

The only individual I know personally who has had COVID-19 is a dear friend and ministry colleague, John Esposito. You may recognize his name, because he’s been on our church’s prayer list for several weeks. John is what Methodists call a “local pastor,” which means that he is a layperson who has been certified and appointed to pastor a local church. He currently works full-time at a lumber company and serves part-time as pastor of the Gaylordsville United Methodist Church.

As the pandemic unfolded, John had already started doing most of his pastoral duties according to the new normal. Early one week in March, he officiated at a marriage ceremony and then a graveside service. On both occasions only a handful of people were present, all of whom practiced social distancing – except, of course, for the bride and groom at the wedding! By midweek he had developed symptoms which he attributed to allergies. By Friday, he was gasping for breath and had to be taken by ambulance to Danbury Hospital. He was quickly diagnosed with COVID-19. I can’t say whether or not this was a surprise to John, but it was certainly a surprise to those of us who know him. He is a young 59 years old, physically active

and strong as an ox. When I was finally able to speak with John this past Thursday, he said that the disease “folded me up like a lawn chair in three days.” He was moved into intensive care, where he was told he would have to be placed on a ventilator and induced into a coma – with no guarantee that he would ever wake up.

It was then that John said to himself, “I might die.” Faced with this terrifying situation, he reports that he was “never afraid” and was completely “at peace.” Why? Because he was placing his fate not only in the hands of doctors, but in the everlasting arms of God.

For whatever reason, John was one of the fortunate ones who survived the virus ordeal. The doctors finally removed the ventilator and he was able to breathe on his own. After weeks in intensive care, he was moved to a regular floor and then to a rehabilitation center, where his night nurse was the daughter-in-law of another of our ministry colleagues, Ed Dayton. That coincidence was just another sign to John of God’s providence throughout his harrowing journey.

As this drama unfolded from day to day, John’s wife got reports from afar about his condition, scribbled them on a piece of paper, photographed the reports on her cellphone, and sent them to family members and friends in text messages. Those messages helped to create a prayer chain that stretched out over five continents. John regards that prayer chain as the “armor of God” in his battle with COVID-19. Today he says that he is 85% healthy, still wobbly and weak at times but free of the worst symptoms. He conducted his first virtual worship service at Gaylordsville last Sunday.

Now, I have no theological explanation for why John recovered and why others who were also bathed in prayer have not recovered. But I fully understand what John means when he says that he “gives God the glory,” because he knew that God was there for him through every labored breath. How else could he accept the fact that he might die, and at the same time, be free of fear and fully at peace?

My sense is that John wouldn’t have been surprised by either outcome – life or death. And neither should we be surprised, because eventually we all have to deal with both outcomes. None of us is so special that we can avoid forever the consequences of illness and aging. But neither should we be surprised by the grace and power of God to sustain us through all the perils of life and death. As 1 Peter puts it, “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.” (5:10-11).