

Easter 7 – May 24, 2020

Text: 1 Peter 4:12-19

Theme: Name and Claim Your Blessings! (BUT READ THE FINE PRINT)

In times when I have suffered, I have found myself lured by the temptation to believe that God wants us to name and claim our blessings, and if we have enough faith, we will receive everything for which we ask. That is the message of popular Christianity. It is odd that we hear so much law preaching on the all manner of evil, but so many preachers carefully avoid talking about this particular evil. I hear Christian preachers rail against every sexual sin possible and some that I'm not even sure exist. Me thinks sometimes thou dost protest too much, if you know what I mean. I hear Christian preachers rant about smoking and drunkenness as though these were new vices and we're all mystified by their negative consequences. And, of course, a currently favorite whipping boy is racism and gender equality. Interestingly enough, I hardly ever hear anyone talk about the temptation to believe that given enough faith, God wants to give you everything for which you ask. In my thinking, that is a far more dangerous sin than any of the others. I also think that many preachers avoid it because it is a vice of which we preachers are particularly fond.

All I have to do is have powerful faith and preach the Word of God faithfully and my church will grow. All I have to do is preach clever stewardship sermons and all our money woes will be cured.

All I have to do is make sure that I please everyone with whatever I say and do, and my congregation will never turn against me. These are all lovely ideas and really seem logical and practical.

If we signed a contract at Baptism, St. Peter's words to us that we hear in the Epistle today would be in the fine print.

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." No one really likes to talk about the fine print. The banner says "Welcome to Christianity!" The fine print says "You will now begin to be persecuted for being a Christian." Some will face great persecution and some will face lesser persecution but no one gets a free pass.

Satan made it clear at Jesus temptation. If you want a worldly blessed life, fall down and worship him and he will give you everything you desire. We do the world a disservice with stories and movies that make following Satan look dark and foreboding. It's not! Following Satan is fun and rewarding! Have you ever wondered why the richest and most famous people are so rarely active Christians? Satan rewards people who follow him and

everyone who is not following Christ is de facto following him. Sorry. I know you love your sweet unbelieving neighbor or relative and you bristle at the thought of them being a Satan worshipper but that is what they are whether they know it or not and whether you like it or not. There are not multiple gods. There is the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and then there is Satan. That's it. There is no Allah. There is no Vishnu. These are made up deities that human beings created for their own purposes. So too are all the variations of secular humanism. Behind all of those fabricated faces is Satan and Satan alone.

If you follow the one true God, there is this certainty. Satan will attack you. He will tempt you. He will try to lead you away from God and he will put up every roadblock in his power to stop you from succeeding in anything. The fact that I have been a pastor in the Lutheran Church for 30 years this summer is not an attestation of my spiritual prowess, nor proof of the strength of my faith or the size of my intellect. It is pure and simply an attestation of God's power and grace. The fact that this congregation has not shut down in 106 years of proclaiming the Gospel, even in the midst of a pandemic and a governmental imposition on the 1st Amendment of the Constitution is not an attestation of our

righteousness or holiness, but it is an attestation of God's power and grace. God can and will overrule Satan when he needs to and desires to but it is not done for our convenience or as a reward for our service. It is done to further the kingdom and attest to the power of Jesus Christ.

As we study Job together on Tuesday nights via Facebook Live, this question was posed, and it is a very good question.

"What do you say to a non-believer who points to the suffering God allows and says, 'How can God be a loving god?'" First of all, it is amusing to me that a non-believer feels he has the right to an opinion about a being in whom he does not believe. That would be similar to be having an opinion about how Muslims should pray to Allah. But if we know nothing of this modern age, we know that every person is entitled to share his opinion no matter how ignorant he proves himself to be by having it. The second thing that comes to mind is that God did not break the world. We did. We are the ones who received his perfect and holy world and brought sin into it by choosing to disobey God. The very fact that he does not abandon us all to Hell is a resounding proclamation of his love for us! The third thing that comes to mind is from the Gospel that is before us today. Jesus says,

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.” Jesus is praying for us. Name and claim that blessing because it is already yours. Whatever we suffer, whatever hardships we endure, whatever kind of worldly ridiculousness we must survive, Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, is interceding for us directly to God Almighty. That is why we can endure and even flourish. Jesus prays for us. Evil happens. People die. Viruses proliferate. Politicians flex their muscles and I don't care, because Jesus prays for us, and that is real power, power that the world cannot have. It is the power of the baptized children of God. It's right there in the fine print.