

This morning's texts, especially those from Acts and 1 Peter, have a sense of urgency to them, don't they? They are forward looking—upward looking, really, if we want to be honest, as Jesus ascends into heaven and the disciples are left with trying to decide how to move forward and continue the mission Jesus began.

Some of these words, these phrases, can sound quite worrisome:

“Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal...”

“...rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings...”

“Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour...”

Dang. Right? Those are some worrisome things.

Full disclosure here, I can't read that particular verse without thinking of days spent working at church camp. The Lutheran band Lost and Found has a song called “Lions” that we sang quite a bit:

“Satan prowls like a roaring lion seeking whom he will devour, and I know that though he keeps on trying he's no match for Jesus' power baby...oh them lions they can eat my body but they can't swallow my soul, no, no, no, they keep on trying to crash my party but they can't get control.”

Even then, it doesn't sound that great, right? I mean, do I really want lions to eat my body, even if they can't swallow my soul? Ideally, I'd like to hang on to both!

But the point that the song makes is one that is important for us to remember when we hear these words that can send a cold shock into our system: that is, the dangers, the suffering, the trials that we may go through in this life, particularly the trials that we might face because of our faith, cannot and will not separate us from God.

When the Gospels and Acts and even 1 Peter were being written, persecution, discrimination, and death were all very real threats for followers of Jesus. They were, after all, worshipping someone who the Roman Empire had executed as a criminal and the leader of an uprising. It wasn't a good look. From the beginning, the Romans were skeptical, and many Jewish leaders feared being too accommodating of this new “Jesus movement” within Judaism because of how the Romans might decide it reflected on *them*. It was a self-preservation thing.

Throughout history, there have been times when Christianity has been persecuted and followers of Christ have had to make choices between their faith and personal safety and security. Luther and other protestant reformers made choices to stand for their theological beliefs and some endured martyrdom, loss of status or wealth, or exile as a result.

Every age has seen it happen somewhere...but we would be wise to be cautious about when and where we place ourselves under the persecuted mantel.

There are some who will always believe that the Christian faith, as a whole, is under attack. But in this country, right now, that is not the case. Our faith in Christ is not under threat, evidenced by our ability to gather, to publicize, to share and announce and post video of what we do here together, without fear of reprisal. What we see instead, is the convergence of different *understandings* of our faith, of what it means to follow Jesus, of what our calling is in the world around us. *That* is where we see conflict. *That* is where some feel their faith is being persecuted because others do not view issues in the same way, even those who profess the same faith in Christ.

Do you see the difference here?

It might seem like semantics, or like it doesn't really matter, but I think it does. I think it matters how we, as followers of Christ, place ourselves in the narrative of suffering and persecution. Because they are not trivial things. They have been real concerns for our forbears in the faith and I think it cheapens what they experienced when we take for granted the privileged place that Christianity has at this moment.

We are able to worship freely, read scripture openly, and proclaim our faith proudly. True, the ubiquitousness or power of the broader Church does not quite occupy the place it had fifty years ago, or even five hundred years ago, but that's not necessarily a detriment. The Church has often done it's best work when it's working from the underside, working *against* the established power of the day. It may not be as popular or as fashionable to be a follower of Jesus. There may be some who don't understand. But there is nothing threatening our lives or livelihood based *solely* on the fact that we profess Christ as Lord—there may be issues that arise from how some Christians choose to live that out, but that's a different story.

Still, there may be times when we, collectively, or as individuals, face trials. Trials of faith, of our heart, of our bodies. And when we face those trials, I am grateful for Jesus' words in his farewell discourse. Let me share them with you again, and think about how you might hear these words when you are suffering, or feeling alone:

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup>I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup>And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” (John 17:6-11)

We are God's.

When we object to injustice and inequity and are told we're asking for too much, we are God's.

When we advocate for the voices on the margins and are told to stop stirring up trouble, we are God's.

When we pursue means to address poverty and hunger and are threatened with loss of our own wealth or status, we are God's.

When we proclaim, loudly and boldly, God's love for every inch of creation and every living thing, and are called heretical or not-Christian enough...we are God's.

God claimed us in baptism, reminds us of how much we are loved every time we partake in communion...and we are protected and entrusted by God. No matter what we endure, how far we may stray, whatever mistakes we might make or opposition we might face: we are God's beloved, precious and holy.

So, in the immortal words of Lost and Found, "Oh, the lions they can eat my body, but they can't swallow my soul. They keep on trying to crash my party but they can't get control."

That control belongs to God.

Just like us.

Amen.