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## What Have We Done?

1 Peter 3:13-22

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 25, 2014 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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November 6, 2011 is a day I'll always remember. Maybe some of you remember it as well. On that All Saints Sunday morning, a group of parents brought forward their infant children for baptism in this Chapel. One of the great joys of the ministry for me is having the opportunity to welcome people, especially young children, into the faith through baptism. Of the more than 20 baptisms at which I've presided, almost every child has gazed angelically at me as I have poured the waters of the faith over their heads. At the very most, a child or two has let out a minimal cry, an accomplishment I almost entirely attribute to my gentle hands and my loving, fatherly presence. Yet on that fateful All Saints Sunday, my stellar baptismal skills were put to the test. On that Sunday morning, I baptized my son Nolan. If you were there, you may remember it. After successfully baptizing three children before him, I was in the baptizing groove. And if my prior baptism record were any indication, it was going to be a breeze. After all, I had been part of bathing Nolan almost every day of his life up to that point, and he loved water. When it was his turn, my wife handed Nolan to me, and I proceeded to place him in the baptismal font, facing his new family, the church. Well, let's just say the walls of this church have scarcely heard such a billowing scream. It was as if our unsuspecting son was trying to shout with all the air in his 8-month old lungs, "What's going on here? What are you doing?"

Nolan's cries on that morning got me thinking even more deeply about what exactly we had done in having him baptized. Of course, we'd considered whether it was best for Nolan to be baptized as an infant or at a time when he would be ready to claim the faith on his own. And we had thought about baptism being God's work of inviting Nolan into God's everlasting family, the communion of the saints. We had reckoned with the covenant and commitment we were making for the church and for us as his parents to raise Nolan as a Christian, even as we knew he would have to affirm the faith for himself some day. Yet, in all our preparation for baptism, I'm afraid we hadn't wrestled deeply enough with what we were doing. We hadn't wrestled with the fact that we were, as Paul puts it in Romans 6, baptizing our child into Jesus' death that having been united with Christ in his death, he might be united with Christ in resurrection (See Romans 6:3-7). On that Sunday morning, we were giving Nolan to be like Jesus in his death, and his cries appropriately marked the occasion. It was not a normal bath. It's one thing to commit yourself to something; it is quite another to give your beloved child—the one given to you to protect and provide for—to give that child to Jesus, precisely in his death. Nolan was right to cry out that Sunday. What had we done?

"What have we done?" This must have been the question on the minds of the early Christians in Asia Minor to whom the letter of 1 Peter was written. If 1 Peter gives us any clue about its original audience, we can be quite certain those Christians were persecuted and suffering. The words suffer, suffered, and suffering appear no less than 20 times in the five short chapters of 1 Peter. These Christians were people acquainted with suffering, versed in being misunderstood and mistreated, and experienced in the hostile attacks and persecution from the world around them. With the hope of an immanent second coming of Jesus delayed more than 70 years, these early Christians must have been crying out louder than a baby placed in a baptismal font; they were surely questioning their commitment to follow after Jesus. We can almost hear them asking, "What have we done in saying "yes" to Christ as Lord? What have we done in following after this Messiah and seeking to live in his kingdom? Did we sign up for this persecution? Did we commit to this pain and suffering? Haven't we done what is good and right?"

To the early Christians burdened by the questions of their sufferings, our scripture passage for today speaks a word of encouragement, hope, and resurrection promise. The passage begins, "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" If I were the church receiving this letter, I might not

have respond so well to this question. I likely would have said something to the effect of, “Who will harm us? Who do you think will harm us? All those people who are working against good, all those around us who are vying for worldly power and wealth, all those who seem to be working for evil against us: that’s who will harm us. Haven’t you been paying attention to our suffering?” Of course, we don’t hear the people’s rebuttal, so 1 Peter continues, “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right—and, as you surely know, you can expect to suffer— you are blessed.” Notice the nuance the writer of 1 Peter gives to his first question about doing good. 1 Peter is not concerned with any old do-gooding. The kind of good to which Christians are called, and the kind about which 1 Peter is concerned, is the kind of good that is best described as “doing what is right,” or as it might also be translated, what is done for the sake of righteousness and justice. We must remember this righteous justice and just righteousness gets its definition and content from Jesus the Christ. 1 Peter says, if you suffer when doing the kind of good that is for the sake of *Christ’s* righteousness and justice, then you are blessed. It seems as though both suffering and blessing are the indicators that one is acting according to *Christ’s* righteousness and justice. Though societal recognition, high praise from peers, and a comfortable bank account are desirable, according to 1 Peter, they are not the indicators of a Christian life.

1 Peter continues, “Do not fear their fear and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” “Do not fear their fear” is as much a gift as it is a command. The early Christians, and we like them, need not be afraid. This word of encouragement reminded the early Christians that their beliefs, their imaginations, their visions for good, and all their actions did not need to be shaped by fear but rather by Christ. The fear-mongers of the world would have Christians both then and now fear their fear. Let fear control your hearts, they might say. And saying nothing more, almost immediately, we know the many things we should fear: fear losing our possessions; fear those who don’t look like us, smell like us, dress like us, or talk like us; fear having our identities stolen; fear our neighbors from the wrong part of town; fear those with the wrong birth documentation; fear our past; fear losing our occupations; fear our reputations being tarnished; fear our uncertain futures; fear not having enough for retirement; fear losing our loved ones; fear pain; fear sickness; fear being alone; fear death; fear fear. Yet, the epistle writer proclaims this gift/command as loudly today as he did to his original audience, “Do not fear their fear.”

Thankfully, 1 Peter doesn’t stop there. The writer offers the early Christians an alternative to this fear. The alternative is to hallow, to sanctify, to exalt Christ as Lord because the crucified/resurrected Jesus is the reason for the hope within them and us. To hallow Christ as Lord in one’s heart is to allow Christ’s holy light to shine from the center of one’s being so that darkness is overcome and God’s glory is revealed. Sanctifying Christ as Lord is allowing Christ to rule every action and reaction, every motivation and impulse, every thought and word and deed, so God’s holiness is made known; it is to have one’s imagination soaked by the waters of baptism and inspired by the Holy Breath of God; it is to be formed in Christ’s likeness; it is sanctification.

The early Christians needed to be reminded that the lives they lived—their work and worship—were not shaped by some abstract, universal principle, which common sense might say is good. Rather, Jesus shaped their lives, and he was the one defining the good they were to do. Those Christians were not suffering because they were following some prescribed moral code any reasonable person or honorable citizen would follow. They were suffering because they were following Jesus—the righteous one who suffered and died for the unrighteous on that cursed tree to bring us all to God. These Christians were being abused for their good conduct *in Christ* (v. 16). And just as Jesus suffered and died but was made to stand again through the Spirit, so too these Christians lived in hope of a resurrection like his. And according to 1 Peter, this hope was and is sure because Jesus is at the right hand of God, and all the powers and authorities on earth and in heaven have already been subjected to him.

1 Peter 3:13-22 is a message of hope, encouragement, and resurrection promise to any who suffer for Christ’s sake in the past, the present, or the future. If you are suffering because you follow Jesus, this passage offers you a good word today. Maybe in your suffering, you’ve begun asking, “What

have I done? What have I done in committing to follow Jesus? What have I done in calling Jesus my Lord?" Maybe the glories of Easter Sunday have faded under the burden of your current sufferings, and it's all you can do to come to church another Sunday morning. Maybe like unattended Easter lilies, your Easter faith has shriveled and is nearly dead because you've experienced hardship and trial as you have followed Christ. Maybe in seeking to serve the poor as Jesus did, you've become poor yourself, and struggling paycheck to paycheck has become too much. Maybe your truth-telling has kept you from promotions or even cost you your job, and you're wondering why doing what is right seems to be penalized rather than rewarded. Maybe your struggle for justice and righteousness has ended with you being mocked and maligned, or even imprisoned, and now you're starting to wonder if there is any hope for a future where justice rolls down like mighty waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

If you find yourself in these places or any like them, take heart and do not fear. Allow Christ to continually shine through the center of your life to reveal God's glory. Hear this message from 1 Peter as the good word of assurance and hope in Jesus that it is. Yes, you can count on suffering, even, and maybe especially, for doing the good that Jesus calls you to. But remember, when you suffer for righteousness and justice sake, you are standing with Jesus and he is standing with you. You're in solidarity with the savior, who when put to death in the flesh was made alive in the spirit. Allow God's Holy Breath to enliven you again, just as it did when you first came up from the waters of your baptism. Let your lungs fill with the hope of the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, and breathe, trusting in the goodness and the power of the one who is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. Your hope is in the Lord.

Yet, maybe some of you are like me. Maybe you, like me, don't know much about suffering for justice and righteousness sake. Maybe it has become easy for us to assume the baptismal waters have stopped causing the death of all that we were and all that we knew prior to entering those waters. It might be easy in a place of religious liberty such as ours to assume that the danger of following Jesus has subsided. We baptize our children and are baptized ourselves assuming it means no harm, assuming our Christian life might not cost us anything too much, assuming the good we're called to do will seem good in everyone's eyes—that we may, in fact, profit from it whether by way of reputation or pocketbook. Maybe we should be asking, "What have we done to the inconvenient and uncomfortable message of following Christ?" For those of us who've become comfortable and complacent in the calling to follow Jesus, this passage gives us reason to pause.

For us, implicit in our epistle lesson today is a crucial reminder during this Easter season: glory travels first the road of suffering and death; resurrection always follows the cross. And if this is the case, we who successfully avoid suffering might necessarily wonder if we have sanctified Christ as Lord in the center of our lives or if we've sacrificed something of Jesus and his way in order to remain comfortable. We might wonder if we are living out and acting upon what is righteous and just. While this passage does not endorse a "martyr-complex Christianity" that seeks suffering for suffering's sake, it does disturb the placid waters of a cheap and comfortable Christianity, self-evidently at home in an unjust and unrighteous world. And in the Spirit's stirring of these waters, we come to know again the calling to follow our suffering savior, Jesus. For us, we must remember when we first entered the dangerous but good baptismal waters where once we expired to be inspired by Christ's Spirit. We must allow those holy waters to wash over us anew, and breathe, trusting that though doing good for righteousness sake will take us through loss, it will also lead us to life.

In April, I had the honor of baptizing Lindsey, a Duke junior, at the Eno River. The running waters of the river reminded everyone present of the dangerous invitation to follow after Christ. When Lindsey went under the Eno's ice-cold, running waters, she placed her life in God's hands. And as she came up out of the waters of death, standing again, she opened wide her mouth to be filled with life. And instead of screaming, she inhaled, as if for the first time, and the Spirit of the resurrected Christ filled her lungs, as it has filled the lungs of so many of us before her. And there, the rays of God's holy light shined beckoning her and us—that is, all of us—to live without fear and follow our crucified/resurrected Lord.