

The Seventh Sunday of Easter Confirmation Sunday May 12, AD 2002

Pastor Jonathan Micheel

1 Peter 4:12-17; 5:6-11

^{4:12} Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

^{5:6} Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

⁸ Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. (NIV)

Don't Be Surprised...

Dear brothers and sisters of Jesus, and especially you, members of this year's confirmation class,

A bleary-eyed man pulls off the freeway late one night. He can drive no farther. He has to stop and get some sleep. He drives around the little town in which he finds himself and discovers that only one motel has a room available.

"You're in luck," says the motel manager. "One room left." He takes the man's payment and hands him the key. "Oh, one more thing," the manager says. Then he pauses. "Um, never mind."

The man takes his key and walks down to his room. He goes in, closes the door behind him, and soon falls asleep.

What the manager hasn't told the man was something about the other people staying at his motel. The manager knows that all of them, except the last man who checked in, have been convicted and imprisoned for armed robbery. They have all just recently been released.

If you were that manager, would you tell this to your guest?

If you were that man to get the last room, would want to know? Or would you rather just be surprised to learn this in the middle of the night?

Here at St. Peter we use what is called a lectionary. A lectionary is a preset series of Bible readings that we use in our worship. Each week, the Scripture lessons have been selected already by the lectionary. This is usually very helpful. The lectionary has us read part of one of the Gospels each week, so that we hear the words or works of our Savior

every Sunday. It also gives us some variety. If Pastor Micheel comes up with the brilliant idea of a 47-week long sermon series on the Book of Obadiah, the lectionary says, "Maybe a little more variety would be better."

Sometimes, though, on special occasions like Confirmation Sunday, the preset readings don't fit very well. Today they fit perfectly. That's because Christians live in a world like that motel full of robbers. All around us are dangers. Those dangers take many forms. Some of them are easy to see, while others disguise themselves as harmless or even good things. We know that the world is full of harmful things because those things have harmed each of us. We know how much life can hurt. We know what it's like to cry and to fight and to wound and to be wounded.

So does God. He could try to lead us to believe otherwise and just let us be unpleasantly surprised by suffering. But he does not. He tells us that suffering is part of a Christian's life, particularly the suffering we endure as a direct result of being a Christian. At the same time, though, he tells us that he is part of a Christian's life (or really, *he* is the Christian's life) and that he will always be there. He will be there when we suffer, and he will be there one day when suffering is gone.

St. Peter says to us and to Christians of every time and place, **Don't Be Surprised**. Don't be surprised when life hurts. Don't be surprised when God cares.

Don't be surprised when life hurts.

There's an idea many people have about Christianity. Many people, including many Christians, believe that once you believe in Jesus, your life will improve. There is truth in that, of course. Having genuine peace with God, knowing real and lasting joy, having a support system to lean on, having a sense of direction and purpose in life—all these things God gives to his people. But some believe that Christianity is about more than that. They believe that sadness and grief and suffering and hard times should decrease or even disappear when a person becomes a Christian.

Did Jesus believe that—that Christians would be immune from suffering? If he did, doesn't it seem strange that he would pray the way we heard him pray in John 17: I pray for them... I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name... (verses 9,11) Why bother asking the Father to protect us if nothing bad could ever happen to us? And why would Jesus say things like this to his disciples: Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. (Matthew 5:10,11) Blessed people will be insulted and persecuted? Yes. We know what he says is true.

Peter, the apostle of Jesus, did too. That's why he wrote these words to Christians: Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

Christians are not free from problems and pain. In fact, Christians have problems that non-Christians don't. For instance, when you're a Christian, some decisions become harder to make. If you weren't a Christian, you would just do what seemed best to you. But now there's this person who actually died for you, and he's alive again, and you find yourself thinking of him and what he wants, not just of yourself. You confirmation class students, you know that Christian views aren't popular. Some of you have described conflicts you've had over your beliefs and your values. Don't be surprised if you have many more of those.

Why would God let Christians suffer? Why would he let them go through hard times? Why would he let them lose the friendship and support of people in the world? A clue to the answer is found in the First Commandment, which you learned in your classes.

Everyone who knows it, say it out loud with me: "You shall have no other gods. *What does this mean?* We should fear, love and trust in God above all things." God knows that without him we are dead—literally, spiritually dead. Yet we don't instinctively want to admit this. We would rather go on believing that we are okay on our own. And when things are going well for us, especially then do we tend to believe that. But when things go wrong, then we realize that we aren't as powerful as we thought. We need help. We need life.

God gives us that life. He lets us suffer to see our need for it. Then he provides it. He lets us be brought low, but then he lifts us up with his love. He condemns us and our sins, but then he forgives us. He lets us suffer, but he himself is there for us to lean on and get strength. Best of all, God promises that the suffering we feel will not go on forever. Jesus suffered, but then he left it all behind. One day, so will we.

You confirmands will soon be entering an environment that holds more potential danger for your soul and even your body than does a motel full of armed robbers. That environment is (I shudder at the thought of it!) high school. You will face pressure there, from inside of you and outside of you. I think all of you have begun to feel that already. God wants you to know it's coming and that it's a part of living and growing up as a Christian. He doesn't want you to be unprepared. Don't be surprised when life hurts.

At the same time, though, don't be surprised when someone is there, when life hurts most...

Don't be surprised when God cares.

Still, it seems kind of silly. If God really cared about me, then why would he not just keep all suffering away? Maybe he doesn't care.

But if God doesn't care about us, we have some explaining to do. We have to explain away someone. His name is Jesus.

If God did not care about us, then why did he send his only Son to this earth, to become a man, to feel the sting of human suffering, to feel the pressure of temptation? If God did not care about us, then why did his Son give up his life on a cruel cross, all of his own free will? If God did not care about us, then why did he bother raising his dead Son back to life again? Why did God bother?

He bothered because he does, in fact, care about each of us. Jesus brought honor to his Father in heaven by carrying out his Father's plan to pay for the sins of the world, his plan to make suffering and death the door to life and glory.

More than that, why did God bother bringing the eternal life and forgiveness and the peace to you? Was it an accident that you were baptized? Was it just luck that you happened to learn the things that God himself wanted you to know? It's not luck at all! All these blessings have come to you because God cares about you.

God cares about you enough to be up front with you about the suffering and the danger that's out there. That's why he says through Peter, Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. You've all seen pictures on PBS or the discovery channel of lions on the hunt. The lion stalks the gazelle, right, and then pounces, then chases and then... tickles the gazelle? Not quite. A lion's intent is to rip its prey limb from bloody limb. That's what the devil wants to do with us. The devil is real, and so is the hell where he'll be spending his forever. He wants you to burn. He wants you to suffer without end. But God, because he cares for you, has rescued you from him. He doesn't want any of us to fall victim to the devil again.

God tells us to be on guard. Be self-controlled and alert... Resist [the devil], standing firm in the faith. Don't forget the words you have learned. Don't forget, most of all, the love of God, your Savior. He will stick with you. If you were staying in that motel with the

armed robbers in it, and you knew who surrounded you, how would you sleep? With your door unlocked and your curtains open and some cash lying out on the table? I doubt it. You'd lock that door as tightly as you could and sleep with one eye open.

God not only tells you to stay faithful and strong, but he enables you to do it. Confirmands, do you remember a few months ago when I tried to draw a picture on the whiteboard in our class? I drew a reservoir of water on one side of the board and a kitchen sink on the other. How does the water get from the reservoir to your kitchen? Through canals and pipes. How does God's love get to your heart and mind? Through the good news about Jesus he gives you. God adopted you as his own through the washing of baptism. God announces to you that your sins are forgiven and that you are his own dear child. He gives you the body and blood of your Savior, which Jesus gave into death for you (how's that for caring!). Through these means of his grace, God will keep you strong, firm and steadfast in your faith.

On a hunch, last week I looked up one of the verses of this section, 1 Peter 5:10, on the Latin version of the Bible I have on my computer. In English, the verse reads this way: And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. The Latin version puts it this way: "The God of all grace... he himself will perfect you, *confirm* you and make you solid."

We say that today you are being confirmed. Actually, your confirmation was something that began when you were first given faith in Jesus. Your confirmation continues every time you receive the gospel of Jesus. Though you won't go to Monday night classes anymore, your confirmation will continue until the day (a week from now, a year, seventy years from now?) when you will enter the glory of the Lord and leave suffering behind for good. God is confirming you. He is strengthening you. He is making you steadfast.

God confirms you because you need it. Life hurts. He confirms you because he cares. And, unlike us so often, God turns his caring into real, powerful action.

To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.