

## **“Do Not Be Surprised”**

1 Peter 4:12-19  
November 4, 2007

“Well, what did you expect?”

It is a question that often comes up when I deal with a new believer. It is not a haughty, “I-told-you-so” kind of question, it is a genuine inquire, “What did you think was going to happen?”

Their friends, their families, their co-workers all seem to be looking and treating them differently. Their old friends do not want them to change. The friends are frustrated because the new believer is not willing to do the things they used to do.

“Well, what did you expect?”

It is a question that often comes up when I counsel with someone who sought to intervene with a friend who is doing something sinful and wrong. They are surprised by the intensity of the response rejecting their help. “Who are you to judge me?” comes the reply. “How dare you?” “Who do you think you are?”

“Well, what did you expect?”

You told someone about Jesus and they laughed at you. Or they got angry with you. Or they turned their back on you. Or they dismissed you by saying, “Well, that’s great for you.”

So, what’s going on?

1 Peter 4:12-19

“Do not be surprised,” Peter wrote, “at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

You can almost hear what was being said that caused Peter to write. “Hey! What is going on? Why are people angry with us? We are only trying to help!?”

People come to church to hear messages of hope. They expect to hear, “Come to me all you who are weary and in need of rest.” They understand the gospel to be about love, about fellowship, about good things. And then, they go out and encounter hostility? Is that supposed to happen?

The church has to be prepared to deal with persecution. The confession that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God” is a declaration of sovereignty and powers. We live in a world of pretenders and usurpers, powers that stand in opposition to the Lordship of

Christ, powers that deny the need for a Christ, a Savior, a Messiah. The command to “Go, make disciples” means that believers are sent out into the world, a world that stands in opposition to God’s sovereignty. Even inviting others to join in gathering for worship, for fellowship, and for prayer is seen as subversive. “It is fine if you want to do that yourself but, PLEASE?, don’t impose that on anyone else... And most of all, do not talk about sin. Sin is an outdated term that just makes people feel guilty. No one wants to feel guilty these days; just tell us things that make us feel better.”

The effect of sin in the world is to tear away and destroy the good that God has created, the good that God has redeemed, the good that God has promised. We can see the effect of sinfulness in our own lives, in the lives of those we care about, and in the world all around us. It tears down. It destroys. It kills. It tarnishes and stains what is good and pure.

Being a Christian does not make you immune to the consequences of living in a sinful world. Faith and membership in a church are not like a Teflon coating that makes everything slip off without touching us. In fact, being a Christian often is just the opposite: it puts a target on your front and on your back.

When people know you are a Christian, they want to club you with it. They wait for you to hit your thumb with a hammer so that they can judge your response. They watch how you deal with injustice so that they can say, “Aha! Gotcha!” They try to get you to do things that Christians would not do so that they can feel better about themselves. And that’s the point: they want to feel better about themselves – “God will let me into heaven because I am better than that guy” – and so they look for opportunities and ways to pick at your fallenness.

Persecution comes in many forms. **Persecution can be as simple as physical violence.** Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 11, where he details

far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

All of these calamities happened to him while he pursued his mission to proclaim Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. People tried to beat his faith out of him, to make him curse Christ because of suffering. Not one of these has happened to me – yet. These things do happen today: Christians are being beat because they are Christian, they are killed because they are Christian, they are in danger because they are Christian. Persecution can be physical.

**Persecution also can be social.** It can come in the form of being ostracized or being tempted. Being ostracized means taking heat for being a “goody-goody.” You can hear it

in the sarcasm of peoples' comments, "Oh, of course you will judge us because you are so much better than we are." Not better; just forgiven and thankful. There is a difference. Being holy means being set aside for God, and that makes a Christian different. This is interesting because it generally means that people know they are involved in something or doing something they ought not to be involved in or doing. Making the choice to be different feels to other people like judgment – in part, because it should. One of the three marks of the church is discipline which "encourages virtue and represses vice." Seeking to be holy sets you apart in a culture that celebrates vice and does not value virtue.

The other approach people take is to tempt. "Oh, come on, it's only this one thing. You do enough other good things to make up for it and it will be fun." Or, "Do you want to be with us or not?" Or, "everyone else is doing it. Look, even that other guy who says he's a Christian is doing it. Why can't you just go along?" Or, "you Christians are no fun. You are all sticks in the mud and so heavenly-minded you are no earthly good or fun."

If I might digress for a moment: people who say that church is no fun have never been a part of a fun church. There are no greater friendships and ties than those of people who worship God together, who sing together, who pray together, who study together, who encourage one another, who commiserate with one another and who rejoice with one another. Yesterday, we had a clean up the campus day – a bunch of people came to volunteer their time to help do yardwork around the church property. It was great to see men and women, young and old, brothers and sisters in Christ sharing in fellowship as they got dirty with rakes, shovels, clippers, and lots of burlap. Make no mistake: I saw them do hard work (confession time, I was doing the dump runs so avoided much of the big stuff). But from my experience, these are the times and the events I remember because I got to know someone in a much deeper and meaningful way.

If you are not involved and feel left out of the fun, let me know or put a note on a prayer card asking to be invited.

So persecution can be physical and it can be social.

**Persecution can be political.** By this I do not mean "Republican" or "Democrat" or "independent;" rather, it is a sense of power lining up against you. As we look in the dynamics of the public square, Christians regularly experience the persuasive power of disapproval. Think about this: how many of you are comfortable wishing others a "Merry Christmas" anymore? What is the offense? Watch the news and see how the clash between culture and public expressions of Christian joy play out in the next two months. You can almost predict the "Nativity Scene" controversy that is coming.

**Persecution can be spiritual.** It is important that we recognize that evil exists. The gospels make clear that Jesus encountered the demonic who were tormenting people. Sometimes oppression is obvious, sometimes it is very subtle. Spiritual persecution also can be systemic. In our Book of Confessions is a document entitled the Barmen Declaration, which was issued by evangelical church leaders in Germany who objected to the ceding of authority to the Nazi government in World War II. The genocides in Rwanda

and Sudan, the targeting of Christians by the Taliban and other governments – these are examples of spiritual persecution.

The church needs to recognize persecution in all its forms because it is real. The reason to go through these things is not to *discourage* you, but rather to *encourage* you that these experiences are normal for a Christian. It is more typical to feel the pressure to NOT be Christian than it is to feel encouragement to grow in your faith. It is in the midst of these pressures to not go public with your faith that your faith can best grow.

**Having said that, it also is important to note that there is a difference between suffering for Jesus and causing suffering using Jesus' name.** Many of you probably saw the headlines this week about the \$11 million jury award against the Westboro Baptist Church for protesting military funerals with signs that said things like, “Thank God for Dead Soldiers.” The Chicago Tribune reports:

For years Westboro members have crisscrossed the country toting signs using "unvarnished words" such as "God hates fags" because they say the Bible teaches them to speak directly and simply. The church's 75-person congregation is comprised mainly of relatives of Rev. Fred Phelps, the founding pastor. The group also blames disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and AIDS, on what it views as permissive morals in violation of biblical dictates. Members insist that their protests, no matter how insulting to some, are constitutionally protected.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-071031westboro-story.1,3389889.story>)

Fred Phelps would like to see himself as a modern day Elijah – he is not. He interprets the rejection and opposition to his message as suffering for Christ. It is not. He is a mischief-maker. Peter specifically says, “Do not suffer as a mischief-maker.” The word Peter uses here contemplates the very kind of thing that Fred Phelps is doing. It is not a common word – close synonyms outside of Scripture seem to be “agitator” or “interfering in someone else’s business.” The fruit of Phelps’ approach is not to bring about real repentance, it is to interfere and agitate to make themselves feel more holy. That’s more akin to the Pharisaism that Jesus condemned rather than a loving rebuke to bring about holiness.

Being persecuted for Jesus’ name’s sake is something to celebrate. Things are no different now than they were when Peter was writing; he could be writing to us here at Chula Vista Presbyterian Church. Do not be surprised at the fiery trial; rejoice when you are suffering for Jesus.

Really? Rejoice?

Enduring persecution is worth it because Jesus is worth it. It’s that simple. Enduring persecution for Jesus’ sake is worth it because Jesus is who he said he is, and he has done

what he said he was going to do, and nothing is more valuable than holding onto his promise of salvation.

As we gather this morning, we are preparing to approach this table – the table Jesus gathered his disciples around as he was enduring the greatest persecution in history: mankind judging and condemning God. He gathered them around the table and gave them words of encouragement about the meaning of his persecution. He told them that the bread was his body, broken for them. In other words, he was going to endure physical and social suffering and brokenness for them (and for us). Then, he took the cup and said that it was his blood, shed for the remission of their (and our) sins. He was going to endure political condemnation and physical and spiritual execution so that he could carry in his own body the consequences of our sin.

There's a song we sing at Daybreak entitled, "You Are My King," which opens with: I'm forgiven because you were forsaken; I'm accepted, you were condemned; I'm alive and well your spirit is within me, because you died and rose again. Amazing love, how can it be; that you my king would die for me; Amazing love, I know it's true, and it's my joy to honor you. In all I do, I honor you."

The things we suffer are temporary. The things we endure will pass away. The trials and persecutions we experience have no significance in comparison with the hope and the promise of eternal life we have in Jesus Christ. Even in the midst of suffering for Christ, we know we are not alone: he has promised that he is with us, even to the end of the age. Peter tells us that we can have confidence that the Spirit of God rests upon us; the Spirit of God who is the spirit of glory.

So, what do we expect? It is a day after day, moment after moment answering of Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" We are on a mission to proclaim Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, to a world in desperate need of hearing that message.

Strange as it sounds, friends, believe the good news: we – the church – should not be surprised, but rejoice, in our sufferings because it means we are sharing in Christ's sufferings. And, if we share in his sufferings, so also will we share in his glory and majesty and kingdom and honor.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

8:45 Invitation and Communion

10:00 Choir Anthem