

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 146:1-10 (NIV) ¹Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul. ²I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. ³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. ⁴When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. ⁵Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever. ⁷He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, ⁸the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. ¹⁰The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD.

Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60 (NIV) ¹In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ⁵This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did

great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. ⁹Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen

7:2 To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! . . .

⁵¹"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." ⁵⁴When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

John 14:1-14 (NIV) "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ²In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one

comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." ⁸Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." ⁹Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. ¹²I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. ¹⁴You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Introduction to the Scripture reading:

A blessed Mother's Day to all of you who have experienced both the ecstasy and the agony of motherhood.

I know that for many, Mother's Day can be a bitter-sweet holiday. For while there are many joys of motherhood . . . there are many sorrows that fill a mother's heart as well.

The sorrow and pain of a wayward child; the despair over a child's choices;

The heartache of a child who is lost and unsaved.

The agony of losing your children to death, or perhaps worse, watching helplessly as a child is ravaged by a painful and unstoppable disease.

There is also the singular pain a mother feels when the one she bore is estranged from her—that won't respond to her letters, phone calls or even emails and texts.

And for some, this is a difficult day because you feel the pain and loss of your own mother or the painful estrangement from her for whatever reason.

The great truth given in our Scripture lesson today, is that God knows our pain and suffering, for he came into our world and entered into that pain and suffering. He bore our grief and carried our sorrows.

We have been going through the book of 1 Peter, and in our Scripture today, the apostle Peter addresses the pain of unjust suffering.

I pray that all of you listening today will be encouraged by the truth of God's *Inviolable Justice*:

1 Peter 2:19-25 (NIV) ¹⁹For it is commendable if one bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. ²⁰But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father help us to understand the great truth that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for us, that He bore our sins in his body. Teach us how to respond to the pain of unjust suffering, in Jesus name, Amen.

Every mother knows that even young children have a keen sense of justice and fairness, at least as it applies to themselves. They know when their rights have been

trampled on or when they have been treated unfairly, and they will loudly protest any violation.

The message today is titled Inviolable Justice. Inviolable means never to be violated, broken, infringed, or dishonored.

Inviolable is not a word we often use, if ever. But I did find an example of a mother who used both inviolable and justice in a single sentence in a letter to her son.

Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, the 2nd President of the United States and mother of John Quincy Adams, the 6th President of the United States, was arguably the most influential woman in America during her lifetime. She took public stands on issues, and her husband valued her counsel to such a degree, that the opposition party derisively called her Mrs. President.

But perhaps her greatest influence was as a mother. In a letter from Abigail Adams to her son, and future President, John Quincy Adams, who was 12 years old, she wrote on January 12, 1780:

"the strict and inviolable regard you have ever paid to truth, gives me pleasing hopes that you will not swerve from her dictates, but add justice, fortitude, and every manly virtue which can adorn a good citizen, do honor to your country, and render your parents supremely happy, particularly your ever affectionate mother"

Mothers have always been, to one degree or another, the conscience of a society, and they have often used their influence to work for justice, or to alleviate the suffering of injustice.

Mothers Against Drunk Drivers is but one example.

Yet, to work for the cause of justice, means that there is injustice. If there is injustice, then how can we speak of inviolable justice, when it is violated all the time?

The very first verse of our Scripture text today speaks of bearing *up under the pain of unjust suffering*.

That begs the question. If God is Sovereign and God is Just, how can there be so much unjust suffering in the world?

That is precisely the question this message is meant to answer.

First, let's consider,

- The pain of unjust suffering (verses 19-20; Galatians 3:13; Romans 8:18-22; 28; Acts 5:41)

¹⁹For it is commendable if one bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

Many have used *the pain of unjust suffering* as an argument against the existence of God as He is revealed in the Bible.

The logic goes something like this: If God is all good and all powerful, then how can evil and unjust suffering exist? Either God is not good that he allows evil and suffering, or he is not all powerful, being unable to stop it.

For many, this is not just an intellectual dispute but an enraged indictment against God.

Let me give a provocative example: The day after Christmas in 2004 a 9.3 magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Indonesia, triggered a massive Tsunami devastating the Island of Sumatra with up to 90-foot waves and sending deadly rollers across the Indian Ocean up to 5,000 miles away. More than a quarter of a million people perished in some 14 countries. It was one of the most horrifying natural disasters in recorded history.

Columnist Eric Zorn from the Chicago Tribune was relieved to hear from a friend via email who had

survived the tsunami. His friend wrote: "I have heard from two Sri Lankan friends that I was worried about. They and their families are OK. Prayers are answered."

Zorn's response was visceral and caustic: "Well, I don't know about that, I can't see all those dead kids and not wonder about the prayers of their parents that went unanswered; the hopes shattered, the lives in ruins."

The rest of the column was passionate and angry:

"Did the tsunami reflect the will of God? Or was God powerless to stop it? If it was God's will, what moral lesson can we possibly accept from an entity for whom individual human life is evidently so expendable? Why isn't constant fear the only sensible attitude toward such a being?

"Either way, what does it mean to trust God or have faith in God when in seconds on a sunny day a crushing wave from the deep can snatch a loved one literally from your grasp and drown him?

"Trust that it's all part of some bigger plan that mere mortals cannot begin to access or comprehend?

"The grand mystery notion fits well enough for me.

"I call my outlook indifferent agnosticism: I don't know if God exists and I don't care. God's will and design for this temporal and spatial vastness, if any, is so patently, deliberately impenetrable that I doubt any mortal has a grasp on it."

Like many, Eric Zorn shakes an angry fist in the face of the God he admittedly does not know.

And yet, the question must be answered. In the face of natural disasters and disease like COVID-19, and even human-made disasters such as terrorism,

every fiber of our being cries out: "NO, that's not the way it ought to be!"

And no, that is not the way it ought to be—and it's not the way God intended it to be. God made this earth a paradise, and it was the sin of humanity by which it was placed under a curse, and as it says in Romans 8:20, *was subjected to futility*.

But Galatians 3:13 tells us that Jesus took on himself the curse of sin—and one day *the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption . . . and that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us*. (see Romans 8:18-22)

But even for those who know and believe that, and as we heard last week, have tasted that God is good, can still be perplexed when suffering unjustly.

Peter wrote: *19For it is commendable if one bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. 20But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.*

The immediate context of these verses was the reprehensible institution of slavery. It has been estimated that half of the population of the Roman Empire at this time were slaves. A slave was particularly vulnerable to persecution when he or she became a Christian. Each pagan household worshiped a particular god, and an open brazier stood at the entrance of the home. Every person entering was expected to take a pinch of incense and place it onto the coals asking that Zeus or Pan or whatever god was worshipped to protect and bless that home and its Master. A Christian could not offer such a prayer to a pagan deity and could be severely punished for it.

Peter himself knew first-hand the pain of unjust suffering. He was arrested, slandered, falsely accused, whipped, thrown in prison and condemned to death.

But he faced it by being *conscious of God*, and knowing that it was *commendable before God*.

Several weeks ago, we read in Acts 5:41 that Peter and *the apostles left the Sanhedrin* [where they had been falsely accused, threatened and whipped], *rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.* ⁴²*Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*

Peter was conscience not only of God's strengthening and comforting presence, but because of God's inviolable justice.

Peter's answer to the dilemma of unjust suffering goes much deeper than the comfort of knowing that it will all turn out good in the end. Peter points us to . . .

- ❑ The example of our righteous Savior (verses 21-23; Romans 3:25-26; 1 Peter 3:8-9)

²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus was, of all people, the perfect example of innocent suffering. None of us are truly innocent. We are all part of the problem of injustice because of sin. Jesus, *committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.*

Jesus did not suffer for His sin. We are told in verse 21 that *Christ suffered for you* and me. He took the punishment we deserved because of sin—because of the curse upon ourselves and upon the whole of creation.

In doing this, Jesus became the scape-goat of all the injustice of the world. It was all placed on him.

The Apostle Paul helps us understand this in Romans 3:25-26: ²⁵*God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* (NIV)

I read this from the New International Version which emphasizes this point of God's justice. Most translations use the word righteousness instead of justice. What we need to know is that in Scripture they are the same word. God's righteousness is His justice and God's justice is His righteousness.

In the sacrifice of Jesus, God's justice was fully met, fully satisfied, completely fulfilled. Romans 8:26 says, ²⁶*he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just.*

God will not only show himself fully just in the end, but he has already demonstrated and fulfilled his inviolable justice, right not, at the present time, in Jesus.

What does that mean for us? It means that even as Jesus *entrusted himself to him who judges justly*—to the Heavenly Father's inviolable justice, so can we. God's justice cannot be violated, infringed or ignored. God is sovereign, and everything God does or allows, *works together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28)

And so, since Jesus *did not retaliate and made no threats*, we are called to *follow in his steps*.

Peter tells us what that means in 3:9: *Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.* (NIV)

Here's what that looks like:

Semere was the head religious leader of his village. Since childhood he had been taught to hate Christians. As a religious leader Semere made it his highest priority to persecute and even kill Christians, leading raids on other villages. One night they burned five houses and two churches including a Lutheran church. Another day they went to burn the house of a Christian woman. Semere dragged her from her home as the rest of the group burned it down. He beat her, hitting her so hard that he broke her arm. She began crying from the pain. But rather than curse Semere or yell at him, she said, 'God bless you brother.'

Semere was shocked. Remembering that day, he said, "My heart was broken, and I cried for two nights. God had crushed me."

Soon after, he left his religion to follow Christ, knowing full well the cost. His home and possessions were burned, his fields were destroyed and he and his family were forced from their village.

After receiving Bible training, Semere returned to his village, boldly built a church, and witnessed 120 people come to faith in Jesus.

Like this woman, and like Semere, we are to be following the example of Jesus,

- ❑ Entrusting ourselves to God's inviolable justice (verses 24-25; Micah 6:8)

²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

We all like sheep have gone astray—there is no one righteous, not one. We have all fallen short of God's glory—of His righteousness—His justice—violating his just commands. We are all part of the problem of injustice.

God spoke through the prophet Micah 6:8 (NRSV) *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

We can only walk humbly with our God as we follow Jesus, our good *Shepherd and Overseer* of our souls; having died *to sins* so that we can *live for righteousness*; or justice, as it could be translated.

Peter stands the argument against God and unjust suffering on its head. Peter asserts God's inimitable goodness, as we heard last week. And out of His sheer goodness, God overcame evil and suffering and injustice, not by His omnipotent power, but by his overwhelming love.

Since the inviolable justice of God is fulfilled in Jesus, we experience that justice in a relationship with Jesus *as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls*. So we can entrust ourselves to the One who judges justly.

Let us pray . . .

Benediction: *May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding . . . guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Amen (Philippians 4:7 NIV)