

Many members. One body united in Christ.

The Second Sunday after Christmas

1 Peter 4:12-19

4 January, Anno Domini 2026

Beloved saints of God who bear the precious Name of Jesus given to you in the waters of Holy Baptism,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In our Lord and brother we see a very hard reality to accept - to bear the Name of Jesus, the very Name which is our source of help and comfort in every need, to be a redeemed and precious child of God, to be an heir of the kingdom of heaven, brings with it the vitriolic hatred of the devil and the world that serves him and even our own flesh which hates the reality of the life of faith and love. There are no exceptions. It doesn't matter your age, your income, or how long you've been a Christian. As St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Galatians, we are all one in Christ Jesus because of the one Baptism for the remission of sins into which we have all been baptized. Now, that doesn't mean that all will suffer in the same way or bear the same crosses. But all will suffer. Each and every child of God must take up his own cross which God has specifically designed for him. You will suffer for believing and confessing the Name of Jesus and ordering your life according to the divine Scriptures. To do so is by default to tell the world and your own flesh that they are wrong and evil. The desires of the Spirit are against the flesh and the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. This is ALWAYS true. At no time do the desires of the flesh agree with the desires of the Spirit. They are constantly at war with one another. Do not imagine, as some vainly do, that they can avoid it or somehow satisfy both. You either believe and live according to the Word of God or you believe and live according to the devil's lies and the desires of your flesh.

Children of God, every day you must prepare yourself for this struggle. You must cry out to God that He would forgive you for the sin that plagued you as you slept and arm you against all that will attack you in the new day. Without the help of God, none of us can stand in this battle. Just because there are some sins that are not tempting to a person, doesn't mean that there are none. One struggles against greed, another struggles against anger, another against despair, another lust, another pride. Each and every one of us needs to daily be in the Scriptures reading, studying, and committing portions of Scripture to our memory. The same with the Small Catechism. We ought to find ways to fill our ears each day with the rich treasury of hymns that we are blessed to have access to. Carry your hymnal. Have

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Lutheran Public Radio playing in the background at home and at work. Let these gifts of God nourish you and strengthen you and drive out the siren calls of your flesh. Husbands and fathers, imitate the example of St. Joseph who in faith endured great struggle to protect his family and daily nourished them with the Word of God, ensured their faithful observance of every Sabbath day, and brought them yearly to the temple according to God's command. Nothing is more important because nothing else we can do for them or give them is eternal. We also need to be mindful the struggles that our brothers and sisters in Christ are enduring. Perhaps we don't know all the details but we can safely assume that, just like we are, the other faithful are carrying crosses that are heavy for them. So we pray for one another, we offer words of encouragement and help if possible, and we are infinitely patient and merciful, quick to forgive and slow to anger because none of us always bears our crosses gracefully. This is how the body of Christ not only endures but flourishes. The suffering of one is the suffering of all because it is the suffering of Christ through which our Lord blesses and keeps us and conforms us to the image of sons. Crosses are given by God in order to put the Old Adam to death and crush idols. They are given so that faith may be stretched and exercised in order to be strengthened and ready for battle. Crosses are not to be despised or avoided, nor are they to be sought out or self-appointed. They are to be received and born in faith. They are meant to drive us to the Word of God, to the promises of our Baptism, and to the Body and Blood of the one who bore the cross of our eternal judgment and conquered it, thereby emptying our crosses of God's wrath and filling them instead with His blessing.

But there is also something else, even more important, that we see in the life of our Savior, and truly throughout the history of God's people - God always delivers His children. And very often our Father delivers us from things that would harm our salvation by those same crosses. You never need to imagine that this time, God will not come through and rescue you; that this time God will let your suffering and tribulations consume you; that this time His mercy and forgiveness will not be enough to cover over your guilt. Every cross is bearable if you receive the necessary strength from God in the way that He has appointed to give it.

There are two particular dangers that we face in the midst of suffering. The first is that we equate our suffering with punishment. When we speak against false teaching or dare to point out to the world that what it thinks and does are evil and the response we receive is mockery and hatred and rejection and persecution - it is very easy to begin to think that perhaps we are the ones who are wrong, who have misunderstood the Word of God and that the hatred and persecution of so much of the world is God's punishment for our error and arrogance. Or even in our day-to-day

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life when we seek to spend more time in prayer and Bible study or to prioritize the duties of our vocations and instead of things going better, they actually become more difficult, it is easy to imagine that doing those things is wrong and our suffering is the evidence.

But this is the common lot of the Church of all ages. You are not alone in this suffering and persecution. It is not unique to us in our day. The Blessed Doctor Martin Luther was tempted by these thoughts often as the weight of the whole Papacy as well the sword of the Holy Roman Empire were set against him to destroy him. When our Lord, Jesus Christ, spoke the truth and went about doing the merciful work of His heavenly Father, He was not well received by most. Some thought He was a drunk. Others thought He was a heretic and blasphemer. Others charged Him with rebellion against Caesar. The people of Nazareth, His home town, tried to drive Jesus off a cliff because of His preaching. More than once the Pharisees had stones in their hands ready to throw at our Lord's head.

Jesus could have looked at the hatred of those people and come to the conclusion that He was doing or saying something wrong and God was punishing Him for it. He could have questioned if He still was God's beloved Son and if His Father was still pleased with Him. If we had been driven into the wilderness and denied food for forty days would we not conclude that God hated us? And more than any of those times, as Jesus was hanging there on the cross numbered with condemned criminals, it's not hard to imagine why people looked at that and said "If God wants Him, let Him deliver Him," implying, of course, that God didn't want Him and wasn't actually pleased with Him. The cross would seem to be the conclusive denial of Jesus' claim "I do the will of my Father." If He had been, then why would God allow such a thing to happen to Him? Why would God allow Him to suffer so terribly, to be humiliated so deeply? Surely that can't be loving!

Unless it is the epitome of love for the whole world, offering the Son of God, who was pleased even to do this will of His Father, as payment for our sins. Jesus' persecution and suffering and death aren't the whole story. None of it can be understood until Easter, when the one who suffered and died as the chief of sinners, was resurrected and vindicated as the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world and whose every Word IS divine truth. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead not only demonstrates the truth of all that He preached and did, but also that His suffering was not punishment from God for His disobedience, but for ours and that God was truly pleased with His Son because He carried out the Father's will to save us. Our Lord didn't suffer for doing wrong but for doing and saying every-

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thing right. It was His innocence and perfect obedience that made Him the acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world and also the object of the devil and the world's hatred. His suffering under the wrath of God was not on His own account but ours. He bore our punishment so that as His dear children we can say of our own suffering and tribulation "I am not being punished. I am blessed to suffer for the Name of the One who suffered for me."

Dear Christian, your Lord and Savior, suffered greatly during His earthly life but not because God hated Him. Rather, in Jesus' suffering, the wickedness of the world is brought to light because it hated and persecuted Him who is the very essence and embodiment of truth and love. In Jesus, who was hated from the moment He was conceived, we see clearly painted for us exactly what use the world has for Christ, and the lot of all who dare to confess and walk according to the divine truth. The only way to avoid the devil and the world's hatred, and even the hatred of your own flesh, is to deny the truth, to deny your Lord, and to give in to their will which will only destroy you as it does them.

Thus Peter urges you to consider yourself blessed when you are counted worthy of suffering the hatred and persecution of the world because your treasure is Jesus and you despise as rubbish all that the world prizes most highly. This suffering is one of the marks of faith and the true Church because where the truth is and where the Name of Christ is proclaimed, there the devil will attack in hopes of destroying you and silencing the saving truth exactly as He did with your Lord. Your suffering will hurt. At times it will be excruciating as you struggle to cling to God's promises, as you feel abandoned and alone. Your enemies will show you no mercy. But no matter because God Almighty has and He has promised to never take His mercy away from you. He will deliver you from every enemy within and without. Your suffering will hurt but it is not eternal. Like your Savior, you will be raised in glory and the truth of your faith will shine like the sun before all creation.

The other danger is that we conflate suffering on account of sin with suffering for Name of Christ. Because sin is a rejection of the divine will and order, sin naturally brings with it consequences for us and others which will ultimately mean suffering. Sin breaks and divides and hurts. Whether it is murder or gossip or despising preaching and the Sacraments or teaching false doctrine or anger - sin always hurts. Sin is by nature destructive because it tears us away from God and drives out the Holy Spirit. When we rebel against the divine will, no matter how justified we may feel, we foolishly attack our own selves as well as everyone around us because the fact of the matter is that we live in a world that God created and ordered, not us. Living any other way than He has ordained, living contrary to the Ten

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Commandments, any of them, is self-harm. Thus the Lord has graciously instituted and ordained the office of the governing authorities to protect those who keep the law and punish those who seek to kill and steal and harm. Likewise, the Lord has instituted and ordained the Office of the Keys in the Church to forgive those who confess their sins but to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent. Those who break the law must suffer some kind of penalty or we will all be encouraged to act against our neighbor with impunity. Murderers and thieves and evildoers and meddlers need to be punished for their loveless deeds against their neighbors. The Church in love and according to Jesus' strict command withholds forgiveness and the Holy Supper from those who are unrepentant and who confess a faith contrary to the Word of God with the fervent prayer that such discipline will bring about repentance and salvation. St. Peter warns and urges us against this kind of suffering, suffering for evil. We are to love our neighbor and do good to him. When we suffer for our sin we have no one to blame but ourselves. This is not suffering for the name of Christ. Just the opposite, really. It is suffering because we are unwilling to bear Christ's Name and live as a child of the light crucifying the desires of the flesh to live the life of love.

Children of God, do not suffer for the sake of evil. Do not put yourself in harm's way by indulging your flesh and trying to compromise with the world. You will hurt yourself and in gaining the world as your friend you will have lost the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. This suffering is a suffering that only leads to eternal death.

But you do not need to be afraid to suffer for the sake of Christ. You have seen how this suffering ends. The suffering of those who cling to Christ and speak the truth always ends in resurrection. When you are persecuted for the faith, you stand in the great company of the prophets and apostles and martyrs who have offered their blood as witnesses to the resurrection and who now wear the crown of life. The suffering and death of Jesus has prepared your way. All His children must take up their cross and follow. But you are not alone. Christ Himself goes with you. Your Baptism stands as a firm testament that, despite how fiercely and loudly the devil and the world rage, they are wrong. You are God's beloved child and He is most certainly pleased with you. He affirms this to you not only in Word but also in the Body and Blood of His dear Son which He gives as constant testament to the forgiveness of all your sins and the resurrection which awaits you. And one day, you will be eternally delivered from this Egypt of affliction into the joys of paradise where crosses will give way to palm branches of victory.

In the Name of +Jesus.

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Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.