I guess I might as well come right out and say it: 2020 is not the year that most of us signed up for. I think that I can safely say that we all started off the year with much different expectations. Just for fun I went and looked at some of those 2020 predictions that usually come out at the end of the previous year. Here are just a few of them: “The Saint Louis Blues beat the Washington Capitals in six games to win the Stanley Cup”, “The top-grossing summer movies are Wonder Woman 84, Marvel’s Black Widow, and Top Gun: Maverick”, and my favorite “the U.S. economy continues to enjoy its current strength in 2020 — not great, but good. The unemployment rate increases slightly but stays below 4 percent.” So outside of there being no hockey, no open movie theaters and unemployment north of 13% everything seems to be on track. But here is my question: Is 2020 actually that weird or are the other years the outliers? The reason I ask that question is because of a few things hinted at in our readings. In Paul’s Letter to the Romans he says, “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” Furthermore in the Gospel we hear Jesus say, “They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.” I know that we have wined and complained a lot in the past few years but I think very few of us have been flogged in the synagogues or had opportunity to boast of our sufferings. There is definitely something in the teachings of Jesus and in the writings of many early Christians that essentially tells us to expect the worst. So it is a worthwhile to ask what place suffering has in Christianity and is 2020 how we really should have been living all along?

But now that I have asked the question, I am going to be like a politician and answer the question I really want to answer. And I am doing this because I think in some ways the question is backwards. That is, the original question seems to see suffering as an indicator of the fact that we are living a good Christian life. And the reason I hesitate at this construction is that there are reasons people suffer besides for being Christian. Just ask the Uighurs in China. And so I think a better question to ask is are we willing to experience suffering for being a Christian? And honestly I am not even sure we need to go as far as saying suffering. Are we willing to experience some inconvenience or a shift in priorities because of our Christianity? I mean how many Christians do we know that given the choice between going to church on a given Sunday and Packer tickets would pick church? Is God at top of the list or down somewhere between the laundry and Matlock reruns? What are we negative things are we willing to experience in order to make God our top priority?

But here is the thing. For those of us who preach it is quite easy to say that we need to make God our first priority, but it is a little harder when we try to explain exactly what that means. Earlier I picked on the hypothetical person who had the choice between church and Packer tickets, but I have to admit that there could certainly be more committed Christians at a Packer game than you might find at church. Everyone is different and so how they make God their top priority will be different as well. In 1st Corinthians there is passage discussing eating food sacrificed to idols in which Paul says the following, “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” The context of this statement is that some of the recent converts in the city of Corinth are finding it hard to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols. Paul points out that it really does not matter because the idols that they were sacrificed to are not real, but then says that there are certain members who are not capable of making this distinction and so it might be best for them to abstain. Here you have the action of eating food sacrificed to idols with two very different reactions. The first group of Christians is unfazed and keeps their focus on God while the second group is not only disturbed by eating food sacrificed to idols but loses their focus on God. The same action has two very different results. And I bring this up to point out that I cannot tell you what making God your first priority will look like because we worship a living God, a God who calls us to be in relationship with him. Think of it like this. I have a very good relationship with my parents and so does my brother. But we both have different relationships with my parents. This does not mean that one of us loves our parents more; it just means that we are different people and so will relate to our parents differently. And so similarly we cannot build a set of guidelines and actions that will guarantee that God is our first priority. And so rather than looking to actions it comes down to the question about whether or not God is the place where we look for the wholeness of our being. Do we look to God to have what Pascal called the God shaped void in our life filled or are we looking somewhere else?

Let me end with a story that incorporates both suffering and a total focus on God for fulfillment. And yes, I know it sets the bar pretty high, but so do this morning’s scriptures In the year 258 a deacon in Rome by the name of Lawrence was executed under the persecution of Emperor Valerian. Before his arrest he is reported to have given the church’s treasures to the poor, which is another great story but we will skip that for now. To kill him the Roman prefect prepared a great gridiron with hot coals beneath it and placed Lawrence on it. After he had suffered tremendously by being roasted on this gridiron he is reported to have cheerfully told his persecutors, “I'm well done on this side. Turn me over!" Lawrence could be so cheerful in such pain because he was looking beyond his present situation to the eternal blessing that are found only in God. Now my hope is that none of us are roasted alive, but my greater hope is that we have God as such a priority on our life that whatever comes we can get through it with joy because we know that our redeemer lives. When God is our first priority all of our other priorities fall into line. Like the year 2020 a lot of weird and unpredictable things are going to happen in our lives, but if we keep God as our first priority we will be able to be at peace because of the communion and intimacy that we have with the creator and sustainer of the universe this day and forevermore.