I almost feel like I am in the middle of a sermon series because today’s epistle lesson continues the discussion from last weeks Old Testament lesson. If you remember last week, which I am sure you do, we had everyone’s favorite Old Testament 6th century BC Minor Prophet, Habakkuk telling God that things were pretty rotten and asking God why he was not doing anything about it. The lesson we learned from that was sometimes the right response to injustice in this world is to complain about it but only if we are willing to wait and listen for God’s response. Now some people [like Mary McGlinchey and my wife] were not so sure about such a teaching and so today we have a message they might find more satisfactory. The message is essentially that when things go wrong we should suck it up and rejoice, remembering how it all fits into God’s good plan. Or put another way we should suffer for and with Jesus. So by popular demand let’s get started and celebrate some joy in suffering.

St. Paul opens today by saying, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David-- that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.” Now let’s get a little background as to what exactly is going on. There is some question as to whether or not when Paul says that he suffers hardship to the point of being chained he is actually being chained at the moment he is writing this or whether he is remembering a time of being chained or possibly thinking of some future time when he will be chained. If your reaction to this controversy is “who cares” then don’t become a biblical scholar because these are the types of things they do all day. We make fun of medieval scholars for pondering how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but such a question seems rather enthralling when compared to what modern Biblical scholarship spends its time debating. But just in case you want my opinion as to the exact state of Paul when he wrote these words my answer is I care as much about the answer to this question as I care about who makes the best Lutefisk in Rushford, Minnesota (but if you want an answer to this I am sure that Lee has an opinion). The important thing to draw out from this is that Paul sees whatever suffering he endures as a worthwhile tradeoff for the spread of the Gospel. But he takes it a step further. In his next few sentences he sketches out the transformative nature of suffering saying, “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.” One commentary says that Paul’s view of suffering is that it, “is not just a consequence of the gospel, but is itself part of the gospel—sharing in Christ's sufferings as the way in which and the means by which the resurrection from the dead comes to its full realization.” And so here is the question. Last week I pointed out that God is not adverse to us complaining about the injustice and cruelty in the world but this week Paul seems to be suggesting that far from complaining about it we should be ready to embrace suffering and injustice as a way of participating in the saving work of Jesus on the cross – so which is right? And my answer to that question is yes. I don’t say this to be flippant, even though that is a pretty good guess with most things that I say. But what I mean is that there are times and places where each of these statements or postures is correct.

Let me give you a quick example of why I can say there are times and places for each. In Isaiah 2:4 we read this famous passage, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” However in Joel 3:10 we read, “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.” Which leaves us to question what exactly are we to do with our swords and plowshares? Well the answer here obviously has to do with context. Isaiah is giving us a poem about a time of peace whereas Joel is discussing a battle between an army and God. And this may seem an obvious point but we cannot just yank bits of information willy-nilly out of the Bible and make conclusions that are to apply at all times and in all places. In other words you can’t look at the lesson from Habakkuk last week and conclude that God wants us to complain all the time and you cannot pull the passage from Paul and say that God wants us to suffer with joy all the time. But this is a real problem because people tend to start with the results and then work themselves into a reason. What this means in practicality is that every time we endure suffering with patience and trust we cannot not necessarily say that we are doing the work of the Lord just as every time we whine and complain it does not necessarily mean that we are doing God’s will. But since we spent last week on the proper role of complaining during suffering let’s take a moment and understand when we might be joyful in our suffering.

The first thing to acknowledge is that it is possible to be doing God’s will and suffer at the same time. In our transactional world we tend to think that if we do what God wants, God will give us something in return and that something in return in most people’s minds does not include suffering. However we do follow a savior who was crucified which means that we might also not get through this world unscathed. In the case of Jesus his crucifixion was the result of some self-preserving religious leaders and morally compromised political appointees who felt the killing of an innocent was a small price to pay to preserve the status quo. As followers of Jesus there may be times where we suffer because doing what is right causes hostility in those who have a vested interest in the wrong thing happening.

The following is not directly a story about doing the will of God but I think it illustrates what I am saying. Some of you may have seen the story from the world of basketball this past week about Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey who tweeted “Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong.” To any reasonable person such sentiments are fairly uncontroversial. Hong Kong has been free for years and it would seem that those who live there would probably not like to be further under the rule of a regime that does things like run a social credit score to decide who gets to fly on airplanes and sends up to two million of the Uighur Muslim minority off to concentration camps in what has been described as a slow-motion state-sponsored genocide. So hoping Hong Kong stays free would seem the right thing to say. But this was met with outrage by Chinese officials who basically told the NBA that no criticism of their regime would be tolerated. Or put in fairly plain language someone was persecuted for standing up for the dignity of every human being and sadly much of the NBA’s response has been to fold like a cheap suit.

There may be times when we are celebrated for living in this world as followers of Jesus Christ but there will also be times where we will be persecuted. Or as John put it in his Gospel, “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” We often live in an upside down world where good is seen as bad and bad is seen as good. And so while we should not seek persecution we should not shy away from it when it comes, if it comes from us doing Christ’s will. Being persecuted for doing right does not sound like a lot of fun but that is the call that Christ puts on our lives so that we may be God’s both now and forevermore.