

Die to Sin

Easter 4

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1 Peter 2:19-25

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

You'll be living in an aquarium. That's what my classmates and I heard over and over throughout my time at the Seminary. As pastors, we would be watched by everyone, in much the same way that people keep an eye on celebrities—or pets.

Not so many years ago, the trendy thing was watching a television program called TMZ. TMZ was renowned for having the inside story about celebrity lives. What they wore, what they ate, whether they ever had to bag up after their pet, or if they left their homes wearing what are called Mom jeans.

Granted, most people may not watch pastors as closely as they watch what celebrities do, but they still watch. We, as the under-Shepherds of Christ, are continuously being watched for how we live, as though we were living in an aquarium.

Some of you may have pets which require aquariums, such as fish, turtles, or snakes. Whenever you want, you can watch what your pet or pets do. What time of day does your pet sun itself? When does it nap? Which corner does it prefer?

The interesting thing is, I've never found the word aquarium in the Scriptures. But yes, the concept is there: "Light to the Gentiles." "City on a hill." "You are the light of the world." Yet when we read about the light of the world in Matthew chapter five, we find that Jesus is speaking to the crowds; and when He says that you are the light of the world, He says you plural. That's what you read in the Greek. "You all" are the light of the world. And again, Jesus was not speaking to just pastors, He was speaking to the crowds who had gathered to hear Him.

So the aquarium principle is there, but it applies to more than just pastors. It applies to every one of us, pastor or member alike. Welcome to the aquarium. Others will be watching you. They will watch what you eat and drink. They will watch when you sleep and when you rise. They will watch and hear when you proclaim that Jesus is the Risen Son of God. And they will see it when you sin, and how you repent.

It may not seem like it, but our Epistle text from First Peter also has something to say about living in the aquarium.

Verse 1

In addition to watching what we eat and drink and when we sin and how we react, those around us will also be mindful of how you and I react when we are charged unjustly. "For this is a gracious thing when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called..."

That's right, brothers and sisters in Christ, you have been called to life in Christ. When you were baptized, you were put directly in Satan's path, and he is actively fighting against you and me and our Lord Jesus. A line that was repeated several times at the Pastors' Conference earlier this week in Champaign was that Satan is not very creative. He uses the same tactics over and over.

How many times in the Scriptures were those who followed God treated unjustly? Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Job was deprived of family, home, health, and even the support of his friends. Several of the prophets were put to death. Church history tells us that the apostles also suffered and died for their faith.

And ultimately, Jesus suffered unjustly, being both flogged—that is whipped to shreds with pieces of rock on the ends of lashes—and being crucified, nailed to the cross by His hands and feet, and left to die of asphyxiation. And even more than that, He suffered hell—separation from God the Father, as we hear Him call out “Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?” “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Having been called by baptism into our Lord Christ Jesus, how can you expect that nothing you do or say will cause others to treat you unjustly? Now if you are sinning and receive discipline, that is different. But if you have done nothing deserving of a particular punishment, and it is because you are making a stand for life, for either the young or the old or anywhere in-between; if you maintain that everything was made in six days and that miracles and Scripture are not fairy tales; if you live that Christianity is what it says it is, and you receive unjust suffering, you are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Verse 2

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you return anger with anger? Do you desire for your enemies to receive the same as they give to you? Have you made threats against others? Have you *thought* about threatening others? If so, repent.

You have been called through the Word; and you have also been put to death and raised to new life in your baptism. “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...For one who has died has been set free from sin (Romans 6:2b-4, 7).”

So if you have been baptized into Christ and have been put to death and raised to new life in Him, live in righteousness. Your sin has been forgiven; and it is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you.

Now when you receive suffering or threats, it is no longer you who receive them, but Christ living in you. It is “(b)y His wounds that you have been healed,” so Jesus does not take these things sitting down. Dr. Lessing from St. Louis Seminary had a memory for Scripture—not just in English, but also in Hebrew—and not just in Hebrew, but also in Greek. He would lecture in class without notes, saying if you look at the English translation, it says this; and then if you look at the Greek, it says this; but if you look at the Hebrew, it says this. It was this professor, Dr. Lessing, who pointed out that the only place in Scripture where it describes Jesus as *standing* at the right hand of God—standing as opposed to being seated—is at the stoning of Stephen. Jesus did not take the unjust treatment of His servant Stephen sitting down. But to add to that concept, what was Stephen’s own response to being stoned to death for his faith? Here’s what he said, ““Lord Jesus, receive my spirit... (and then he said) Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”” Kind of sounds like what Jesus Himself said as He was being crucified, doesn’t it? ““Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34b).””

Verse 3

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps...He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness...For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and in Him, you have new life. Jesus has found you from straying in the wilderness of sin and has taken you under His care so that you can get to the pasture of first heaven, and then the new heavens and new earth. For a time, you or I might have to suffer here; but we know where we're going. We hear the voice of our Shepherd and we follow Him.

But don't take my word for it; I am only an under-Shepherd. I am called to point you to Jesus, your true Shepherd. If I tell you things which are not from Jesus' Word, don't listen to me. But if I tell you the Shepherd's Word, you'll know it. Jesus' sheep know His voice. That's what our Gospel text tells us.

Don't get me wrong, I am called to be your pastor; and I am called to live in the aquarium. Yet I am not the only one in the aquarium. You are there with me. Jesus, our Shepherd, has said so. Others are watching. They watch what we eat, what we drink, when we come and when we go. And through the Holy Spirit given to us at our baptism, we live the new life in Christ Jesus. We proclaim Jesus as Lord and Him crucified and risen for the forgiveness of our sins. And when we sin, we repent. That is the pattern of our life: living in Christ and proclaiming His Word, and living in repentance of our sins. That's what our Shepherd has said in His Word. Live as though you were in the aquarium with me, because you are. And as you live in the aquarium, others will see your faith. You are a city on a hill, a light to the Gentiles, and God's chosen people, through His Son, our Shepherd, Jesus Christ. In Jesus' Name. Amen.