

HOSTILE TAKEOVER

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1 Peter 1:1-9

Two weeks ago—Palm Sunday—I woke up and, as I normally do, I took a few moments to scan the news headlines. I was greatly distressed to read that two churches in Egypt had been bombed earlier that day during their Palm Sunday services.

The first bombing took place in the city of Tanta at St. George's Church. According to eyewitnesses, during the Palm Sunday mass, as the congregation was chanting the liturgy for that holy day, a man in his forties wearing a brown jacket ran toward the altar and detonated an explosive belt. 78 worshipers were injured and 28 were killed.

The second bombing took place 90 miles north in the city of Alexandria at St. Mark's Cathedral. Alexandria is the historic seat of Christianity in Egypt. Tradition says that Saint Mark—the same Mark of the Gospel—arrived in Alexandria around the year 60 AD. He ministered there for seven years and converted many to Christianity. He also founded a church which today bears his name. On Palm Sunday, when the church in Alexandria got word of the bombing in Tanta they shut their doors. A man with a bomb tried to enter and set off the metal detector. He was stopped by the security police. He detonated the bomb outside. 48 people were injured and 17 were killed.¹ A total of 45 people died in those bombings.

Most Christians in Egypt are part of a cultural group known as the Copts. Coptic Christians are a minority in Egypt comprising 10% of the country's population of 92 million.

This was not the first time Coptic churches had been attacked. In 2011, another bomber hit St. Marks in Alexandria killing 21. This past December, a bomb ripped through the main Coptic cathedral in Cairo during Sunday mass killing 25.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for all of these attacks. I want to be clear that I do not view the Islamic State or ISIS or the Muslim Brotherhood or any other group as representative of the Muslim faith. These are political, militaristic organizations using religion as a shield to promote their violent agendas.

Our own country has not been immune to violence against churches. Famously, 53 years ago, on Sunday, September 15th, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan planted 15 sticks of dynamite with a timing device beneath the front steps of the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palm_Sunday_church_bombings

16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The blast at 10:22 a.m. injured 22 people in the church and killed four young girls. Three of the girls were 14 years old and one was 11. A 10-year-old—a sister to one of the victims—lost her right eye in the explosion.

In Fort Worth, Texas, in 1999, a man with a semi-automatic handgun walked into the Wedgwood Baptist church on Sunday evening during youth services and fatally shot 3 adults and 4 teenagers before killing himself.

Two years ago, in June of 2015, you will recall that 21-year-old Dylann Roof entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, during their Wednesday prayer service. He sat in on the Bible study for a while before pulling a gun from his fanny pack and fatally shooting 9 people, including the pastor.

This is only a sampling of the many acts violence against Christians and churches. The reasons for these attacks are varied. In the Egyptian attacks it is a matter of conflict between members of one religion against another for political gain. The shooter in Texas appears to have been mentally ill. He is reported to have made disparaging remarks against the Christian faith and the Baptist Church during his rampage. He was known to be violent and paranoid. The attacks in Birmingham and Charleston were clearly racially motivated. The Birmingham bombing was one of a number of bombings against African-American churches during the Civil Rights era. In Charleston, the shooter was a self-described white supremacist and confessed that he hoped to ignite a race war by his actions.

From the time of Jesus, some Christians have been the target of persecution, suspicion, hatred, and violence.

Our reading today addresses this very issue. We read from a book called The First Letter of Peter. This letter was likely not written by the Apostle Simon Peter but instead composed by someone living in Rome in the late 80s AD. The letter was intended to be circulated among the churches of Asia Minor—the region which today is the country of Turkey.

The purpose of the letter is to address the suffering of the Christians in this region who were enduring punishment or persecution as a result of their Christian faith. This region was predominantly Roman and to Roman culture Christianity was despised as a foreign religion that posed a threat to the morality of the Roman society. Most of the Christians would have been converts so they would have felt the negative response from neighbors and family after their conversion. This letter is an appeal to Christian believers not to turn away from the gospel. Because of their conversion, the believers had become outcasts in their own country. They were living in a hostile cultural environment.

At this point in history, there was no 'imperial mandate' against Christianity. However, it is clear that the hostile attitude communicated by the government signaled to local officials that harassment of the Christian population by anyone would be tolerated. In some areas, the Christians become second-class citizens and suffered daily injustices with no recourse.

How should the believers respond to this injustice? The letter calls on them to live as examples of God's people in the world. The letter encourages them to behave honorably in all their dealings so they might be witnesses of the gospel to their persecutors. The letter reminds them that they are blessed in Christ; they are a *chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people* (2:9). They are to remain faithful even in the face of their suffering.²

The letter begins by identifying those *who have been chosen and destined by God... sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ*. The letter goes on to say that by God's mercy God has given believers a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ. The letter quickly recognizes that the believers have suffered various trials. Through these trials, the faith of the believers is tested. The result is that through Christ their souls will find salvation. In other words, through their suffering they become one with Christ, and through Christ they receive salvation.

We, today, are blessed. We, as Christians, as members of First Presbyterian Church, have not and are not likely to experience persecution at the level of a shooting or a bombing. This is not to say that something bad will never happen. It could. We're fortunate in that we are free to practice and express our faith in a way that many people in this world are not. We do not attend worship with the nagging fear that we might be attacked. We are not going to lose our job or get kicked out of our home because of Christian faith. For the most part, in our nation, the Christian faith is encouraged more than it is discouraged.

Because we are so blessed in this way, we cannot idly stand by while others are persecuted just because they do not look like us or they pray differently or they were born in another place. Our scriptures call us to love our neighbors, to care for those in need. We cannot allow anyone, even our government, to set any group apart for harassment or intimidation. When this happens, we must intervene and stand with these people, and, if necessary, suffer with them. This is what Christians are called to do.

However, let us return to those Christians suffering persecution. One of the greatest witnesses to the gospel that I can remember is the response of the people of the Emanuel church following the shooting. To a person, that congregation

²https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/commentary_display.asp?installation_id=93040374&item_id=93050235

responded with grace and forgiveness. They could have lashed out with anger and a demand for justice and we would not have blamed them. But they chose the way of Christ. They lived the suffering of Christ. They were a witness to the world.

In Egypt last week, one of the Coptic bishops responded in a similar manner. In a statement to the press, he echoed the words of First Peter when he said, "With these incidents we are now living with Christ in his pain."³

My wife has a friend who lives in Nashville who is Egyptian. After the Palm Sunday bombings, my wife sent him a note expressing her sympathy over the tragedy. He wrote her back to tell her that the church in Tanta—the site of the first Palm Sunday bombing—was the church where he and wife had been married. His sister and her family were in the church at the time of the bombing. Two of them suffered severe burns. But it is crucial to note how he ends his message to my wife. About those who caused the bombing, those who injured his family, he writes, "We pray to the most merciful, the king of peace to enlighten them to know and understand the truth of God the love and peace."

The Letter of First of Peter could not have said it better.

Amen.

³ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-copts-mark-solemn-good-friday-after-church-bombings/>