I have nothing exotic to preach today. In fact, in this time of a global pandemic, an attempt to write a reflection itself is an exercise in faith. Once again, there have been stories that brought joy and peace, and stories that brought sadness and grief. On the happy side, yesterday, I celebrated my first baptism of the Easter and COVID season. I looked like I was ready to perform a surgery, but the delightful two-year-old Callum made up for all that. There is a family in the parish that split their stimulus checks between St. Vincent, House of Bread, the immigrant families in the parish. How can it not warm your heart? And then, the weather has been helpful and spring flowers have been gorgeous. Easing of some restrictions is also making many people feel a little hopeful. I am glad for all that. On the other hand, the long-term effects of the pandemic are beginning to set in, causing great hardships. Furloughs and unemployment are becoming rampant. At least four people from our parish were part of the 500 people furloughed at the University of Dayton. These are just the ones I know. Some of them will not return to work there. The need for assistance with food, rent, bills, and payments are sky rocketing. Despite every effort, children have lost invaluable time in school. We have parishioners recovering from COVID-19 in local hospitals. Wedding plans have to changed, vacations have to be cancelled, bills have to be paid.  And then, the uncertainty, the inability to plan, the stress, and simply the lack of human touch – these are having devastating effect on our mental and physical health.

As is always the case, in these times God does not abandon us. Jesus is presented to us as the shepherd who came to life and give it in abundance (Jn 10:10). As I read today’s scripture reading, I realized how timely and appropriate they are. Especially, today’s second reading from Peter is addressed to a suffering church, a violently persecuted church for her faith in Jesus Christ. Pandemic and persecution – two widely different realities, but Peter offers us inspiration for our times. The suffering of the early church led them to reflect on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ – the Christ who came to give abundant life. In many ways, this is what I am attempting to do in this homily - to connect our personal and global struggles with the suffering of Christ. In my three points for today, I attempt to use today’s scripture to throw light on our reality today.

1. **Suffering is a Calling?** As we navigate through these very difficult times, we hear Peter referring to suffering as ‘a call.’ He says, “If you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good this is a grace before God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps” (1 Pet 2:20b). To many, this may sound scandalizing, but Peter is referring to suffering as a call a vocation to all followers of Christ in general. Why does Peter refer to suffering as a calling? Peter was not condoning suffering by referring to it as a call. He was not asking us to intentionally cause or invite suffering. God does not wish anybody to suffer. However, suffering and death realities of our human condition. Peter refers to suffering as a calling is because he was trying to attach a meaning to the innocent suffering of the early Church. By unifying their innocent suffering with the suffering of Jesus, Peter was trying to give Christians meaning to their experience. So he says, “… Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps” (1 Pet 2:21). In other words, suffering is a calling because suffering unifies us with Christ. As hard as it may seem to term it as such – suffering is a painful privilege.
2. **Salvific Suffering.** The second reason why suffering is a calling is because, in the Christian context, suffering is salvific. Life and salvation came to us through the passion, suffering, and death of Jesus. Once again, as Peter says in today’s second reading, “When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet 2:23-24). Salvation and eternal life came to us through the life, suffering, and death of Jesus. In other words, Jesus transformed his suffering into a life-giving opportunity. Here then, something for us to think about: As we face our own struggles and endure our own suffering can we make it a life-giving moment? Here are a few practical ways I suggest.
* First, if suffering, pain, struggle, anxiety, uncertainty is a reality in your life, pray for others. There is nothing more powerful that prayers accompanied by tears.
* Second, if your suffering is bearable, (you have sufficient nourishment, if everybody in your family is healthy and safe) then instead of instead of focusing on your pain, identify with other people’s struggles and try to make someone else’s burden light. In this way, our suffering becomes the cause of someone else’s relief.
* Third, if you find yourself blessed, connect yourself to other people’s struggles. In this we act like the Jesus, the Good Shepherd who came to give us life, life in abundance.

In these ways, we can make our suffering salvific like Jesus did. By our wounds, they can be healed.

1. **Focusing on the Common Good.** Let me invite you think about suffering beyond our personal suffering. It has been unprecedented in our generation that one single crisis has uniformly impacted all of humanity. Every human being, every living creature, every part of the world is affected by it. It has also made us aware of how connected we are. For us to be free from the virus and healed, the whole world has to be free from the virus and healed. Otherwise, in one way or another, we will always be at risk. Here then lies the opportunity – the possibility to unite as the human race. In Catholic terms, this is called the ‘common good.’ Jesus always thought about the common good, about the good of the entire flock, about the whole world. In today’s gospel reading, he calls the sheep by name, walks ahead of them and they follow him because he leads them all into safety (Jn 10:4). This pandemic is compelling us think of the common good. Nobody will succeed individually. At this time, if we can stop playing the nationalistic card, if we forge our common human bonds, if we can determine a common destiny for the human race, it could be very life giving. This is also a kind of suffering – that we look beyond our personal freedom, our personal benefits, for the common good. For example:
* Be selfless for others. Let us be a caring people. Whether it is wearing a mask or maintaining social distance, do if for the other person.
* If you are healthy, think about the health care workers who will have to risk their health if we get ill. If not for our sake, for their sake, let us conduct ourselves with care.
* When we feel strong, that precisely is the time to think about the most vulnerable either amidst us or on the other side of the globe. Until every human person recovers, humanity is at risk. Let us think beyond ourselves about the common good.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Even in our most painful moments we are not alone. He who suffered it all for our sake, is with us in our suffering. Let us bring our pain and suffering to this altar and surrender them into the hands of our eternal shepherd. May he give us the grace to endure our own suffering and to give life to others who are suffering.

- Fr. Satish Joseph