

Hi everybody, I'm Andy. I'm a transgender man and use he/him pronouns. I grew up in Michigan in a charismatic church in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. I'm currently a PhD student in Hebrew Bible at Drew University. I've had kind of a tumultuous relationship with church. I got kicked out of my church and barred from communion within the whole denomination after coming out. During that whole process my experience of the Spirit in worship and the Bible were my foundation. The Spirit spoke to me through Scripture and consistently reminded me that God is a God who heals and does not harm. Today I've been asked to read and reflect on 1 Peter 1:3-9. This text was a profound source of strength for me during my coming out process and I hope it can bring you some amount of comfort in these difficult times. Hear these words from the NLT.

*"All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see.*

*So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*

*You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls"*

This passage is the promise of healing. It is the rejoicing in healing already given and the healing still yet to come. It is the promise of our salvation, which is the healing of all things. Salvation is wholeness and restoration. It is the coming wholeness of the world, self, and others. That wholeness will never decay or diminish, God's promise will never change.

We have already endured much suffering and will continue suffer for at least a little while. We suffer exclusion and rejections when coming out. We suffer the uncertainty and doubt of having to disentangle God from false, death-dealing theologies. We suffer injustice and violence against ourselves and our community. We all too frequently suffer the loss of those around us to murder, suicide, poverty, disease, neglect, and systemic violence. We are currently reminded of how our community knows all too well the devastation and loss of pandemics. This passage acknowledges and affirms the reality of our suffering, as well as affirms the reality our faith.

Take heart. Remember that God does not cause suffering for the sake of healing it. God does not create injustice for character development. God does not test us to make sure we really love

Them. God is not an insecure lover who requires tokens of affection in order to stay around. Rather, He is kind, gentle, and steadfast. If we lean on God in our times of suffering, we come to see that God is right where She promised She would be. God grieves with us, God suffers with us, God is walks right beside us and leads us into healing.

So though we cannot always see God, we know God and we trust God. We in the LGBTQ community have a faith that has been tested time and time again. We are told by religious institutions that God does not accept who we are or the way we love. We are told that our faith cannot be genuine because we live in sin. Despite all these things, here we are. We know that God loves us just the way we are. We know that our faith is genuine because we are still here. We have joy because we know that healing is already here and more is on the way. Like the writer of this letter, we have a strange, glorious, inexpressible joy. This joy is gloriously inexpressible because our joy is wrapped up in our grief. We know who God is because we have suffered through so much. We know who God is because the church has too frequently modeled for us who God is not.

As queer people of faith, we have been through the fire. As queer ministers, we walk back through that fire in order to hold the hands of our queer siblings as they navigate their own way through that fire. Borrowing imagery from Daniel 3, we were once like Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednigo, thrown into the fire and we survived against all odds. Now that we've survived, we return to the furnace as the messenger of God, to sit with others and beat back the flames.

Child of God, know that even though you may not always feel it, your faith is strong. The fact that you are here is testament to the strength of your faith. In this time of trauma and suffering, give yourself time to grieve. Your tears are as much worship as your laughter, your lament just as cherished as praise. Know that you are the person God created You to be and you were called for such a time as this. Healing is on the way. Take heart and keep faith, for God is already working in and through you to bring healing and wholeness to this world. Amen.