

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Living Hope
I Peter 1:3**

Last week, John kicked off a series entitled “Hope that Endures.” This is part of a three-series study of *Faith, Hope and Love*, which will take us thru Christmas. HOPE: it’s a word I’ve been spending a lot of time thinking about, because it’s a rich word. It’s theologically dense. And yet, it’s so commonly used in our culture, in our conversations, that it almost has no meaning. Yet I don’t think it was ever meant to be so complicated that a 3rd grader couldn’t grasp it, or that you need a Ph.D. to appreciate it.

What is hope? What does it do? What’s it good for?

We’re going to be looking at HOPE thru the lens of the apostle Peter, one of Jesus’ closest followers, and one of the leaders of the early church after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. We’re going to be looking at the first letter in the New Testament that bears his name...First Peter. Why should we read this? First Peter is written in a context where Christians were facing unbelievable hardship and persecution, and that’s not happening where we are. It was written probably in the early 60’s AD...what could it possibly say to us today? What could God be saying through this text to us today? How might this be God’s word for us?

Well, let’s start by reading it:

1 Peter 1: 3,4

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”

I want to give you little background. The date is July 19, AD 64. The place is Rome, which at that point in history was considered center of the universe (at least the Romans thought so). And, in the city of Rome, fires are burning out of control, everywhere.

Eventually, almost the entire city would be severely damaged or burned to the ground. Hardly anything escapes the raging flames. From the very first night, there are some ugly rumors spreading: People were saying that the fire wasn't an accident; that it had been set deliberately by order of the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Nero, himself...and his men were given orders that, if anyone tried to extinguish it before it spread, they'd be killed.

So here's the thing: Everybody knew that Nero had an ego bigger than the Empire. Everyone knew that Nero had long desired to create a NEW Rome, HIS Rome that would bear his mark into history. So now you have these rumors and thus the old slogan you may have heard, "Rome burned while Nero fiddled." It conjures up this picture of the emperor whiling away his time while his city was destroyed; that's exactly what many Romans thought happened.

In the end, Nero got what he wanted. The city was almost totally rebuilt, the roads were widened (kind of like our very own 70th Street project), the architecture well-planned, and a huge new palace with elaborate and fabulous gardens constructed all around it. Still the ugly rumors persisted and Nero's popularity in the Gallup polls of the day dipped to an all-time low.

After a time there emerged another ugly rumor, this one most likely started by Nero himself: The fire, it was alleged, had been set by some troublemakers of Rome, by a sect of religious fanatics who believed that they were on their way to a heavenly paradise, and so whatever happened here in this life didn't really matter...a bunch of religious wackos that even the Jewish leaders were suspicious of, with their claims that God's messiah had appeared. Nero said it was the "Jesus-followers," the CHRISTIANS who had set the fire. After a time of letting those rumors percolate, the Roman militia took off the gloves; they began rounding up people who were known to be Christians and they tried them publicly. If you denied being part of this religious group, they set you free. If you didn't deny your allegiance to a god called Christ, you were executed.

Some of them were crucified on crosses. Some were sewn up into fresh animal skins and died when the lions or wild dogs were unleashed on them. Others were covered with pitch and lit as torches as evening fell. Times were hard for these early followers of Jesus.

So now, imagine that you are the apostle Peter. You are living in Rome and these rumors are starting to spread, then stories of persecution begin to appear, and since you are a respected leader of Jesus-followers, you know your days are most likely

numbered. In fact, church history says that both Peter and the apostle Paul were executed around this time in Rome.

Peter is older now and he writes this letter that will be read to the Jesus-followers scattered around the Mediterranean, but particularly the churches in modern day Turkey...churches he knows will face persecution, if they haven't already. Persecution, discrimination, violence done solely because one confesses to being a Christ-follower.

That is obviously not the situation we live in here in the United States. But what we tend to forget about so easily is that, even now in 2011, that IS the way it is in much of the world. If you're a Christian in Pakistan, or China, or a Dalit Christian in India, or Iran or Iraq, or several other places around the globe...the church IS persecuted. People are locked up or killed merely for being Christ-followers...it is so far away from our world, it doesn't seem real.

At the very least, it should make us do a couple of things. One is to remember to pray for and to learn from those Christians (and, I would add, pray and learn from those non-Christians) in countries where there is great danger. As we think about HOPE, and what hope means for people who suffer, we need to ask ourselves the question: Why is it that the places where there's great suffering...are often the places where expressions of authentic Christianity are most visible?

So Peter writes to these believers. He knows it's probably his one shot. What will he write? What should he say? Should he give advice? Comfort? What would you say? What would you say to someone if you just had one shot, and then really did not know what the uncertainties of the world might bring them? Some of you are like me, and have kids close to graduating from high school or college. It's a definite transition in life, a time to let go in so many ways. If you were to write a brief letter to your student to help them along the way, what would you say? Or, if you had the opportunity of knowing you would not live much longer and could write a letter to your niece or granddaughter or neighbor or your classmate, what would it say? Peter's decision is very clear: You write about the most important thing first. You write about HOPE.

I looked up a dictionary definition of hope, looking for some inspiration. Here are a couple definitions:

- the feeling that what is wanted can be had
- the expectation of fulfillment of success

I don't know about you, but when I read those definitions, I'm kind of left with this sense that it's mostly about me, where I am the central focus. But what about Biblical hope? "Biblical hope," one author says, is "the expectation of a favorable future under God's

direction.”

Hope is a topic Peter has no problem writing about. In fact, it's one he has a hard time staying away from. After addressing his letter, he plunges into verse 3 in typically enthusiastic fashion: *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade...”*

The believers that Peter is writing to are people who may be in grave danger when they read his words; and, indeed, by the time they do, HE himself may be gone. What is important; what is going to last? Peter's sentences are packed with GOSPEL, with good news. Just in this one little section, a reader is reminded of all these things:

Our HOPE, our expectation for a favorable future comes from God's great MERCY, not something we brought about. It is something GIVEN to us by God, handed over as a gift. The good news can only be compared with a NEW BIRTH, with life STARTING OVER, because it changes everything. It is SEEN CLEARLY in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that hope is something imperishable, something eternal. It is not bound by time; it is not limited to the present. And, if the present circumstances are dark and dangerous, if they include suffering and trials, then remember that this will make your faith stronger. And when in the end you die, your hope is in something that does not.

Peter assures them...and US...that, first and foremost, before anything else, our hope is in Jesus Christ. The foundation. Bigger than suffering, more powerful than death. It's like he's saying, “If you only get one thing, get this! Memorize it, internalize it, know it, feel it. If you only get this one thing, remember this: Your hope is in Christ.” What would your message be?

About 13 years ago this week, my wife Andrea decided to throw a huge surprise birthday party for me. Those of you who know me know that I love birthdays. Even when it's someone else's birthday, I somehow manage to steer the conversation around to my birthday--even when it's months away. My birthday is next Thursday, by the way. So Andrea decides to throw me this surprise party. It wasn't one of those milestone birthdays; I was turning 35. (I guess if you do the math, you can figure out how old I'll be this week). She did an amazing job of keeping a secret. I was clueless. She rented a community center; worked out all the details. Tons of people came. It was awesome.

Well, in between all the preparations that day, she had a routine doctor's appointment to check on the health of the baby she was carrying in her tummy. The ultrasound tech was making small talk with her, joking and carrying on. Then all of a sudden, unintentionally, the woman says, "Oh." Whatever it was she saw on the ultrasound, it changed the mood in the room, and Andrea says, "It's not good, is it?" The tech says, "Uh, well, it's not conclusive, but I think I need to have your doctor come and talk to you about it." And she left, almost crying, leaving Andrea feeling alone, confused, naked, exposed. The doctor comes back after having a chance to review the ultrasound results for herself and tells Andrea that the baby boy she is carrying has multiple deformities which would surely result in a stillbirth.

Undoubtedly, this was one of the worst days of Andrea's life. The doctor tried to comfort her and recommended that the only true option she had was to abort the baby. She left the doctor's office with whatever hope she had, dashed against the rocks. And, by the way, she still had this surprise birthday party to organize. So she carried this secret with her from 10:00 a.m. that morning until we got home late that night, after all the fun and partying we'd had for my birthday. Talk about extremes.

HOPE became a word we got to know really well during those months of anticipating Gabriel's birth, from that day in late October when we learned of his uncertain future to the day he was born and died, that following February 18th. Now friends, I may have been pastor, ordained, theologically trained and intellectually confident to address topics like biblical hope, but I have to confess, I was a mess during that time. And you know what held me together during that season? It wasn't all the books I'd read about great heroes of faith. It wasn't my systematic theology notes from seminary. These were all helpful and good. But it was the witness of my wife, praying with her, talking to her, taking long walks with her, listening to her as she was able to cut through the crap of platitudes and quick, easy answers...as she embraced and appropriated as her own the words of Job, where he, in *his* time of greatest challenge, looked despair in the face and was able to say,

*"I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God."
~Job 19:25*

Gabriel's memorial service was amazing. Part of the advantage of being a pastor in a multi-staff church is you have lots of friends who are pastors. So, all six of my pastor colleagues participated in Gabriel's homecoming. A woman came up to me afterwards

and said, "How do people do this who don't have Christ in their lives, Paul?" And I said, "I don't know. Honest to God, I do not know." Peter says first things first: Don't ever forget where your hope is. You have a present and a future...in Christ. And it is ROCK solid.

Now, after starting out with the reason for HOPE, Peter tries to move on in this letter, he really does! In verse 13, he begins to make an abrupt shift. "THEREFORE," he says. "THEREFORE, with minds that are alert and fully sober." Another translation says, "THEREFORE, prepare your minds for action, discipline yourselves." THEREFORE, LIVE out your faith. Don't be conformed to the desires the world cultivates in you. Be different. It's okay to be different. You're supposed to be different! God is holy, separate and distinct...and God's people should reflect something of God, "be holy in all you do!"

Peter tries so hard to do exactly what the apostle Paul does in virtually every other New Testament letter to the early church. Begin by talking about God, what God has done in Christ, where our hope lies in God's grace...and then use the great THEREFORE to talk about how to live it out. Move from our head to our hands and feet; from theology to ethics, from belief to action, from inner spirituality to outer manifestation. And for a few sentences, it works. THEREFORE, live your life differently. THEREFORE, let the hope change how you live, where you put your priorities. THEREFORE, be more like obedient children, doing what your parent says, than following whatever you want to do.

That word "therefore" is like bridge between these two pieces of land, hope in Christ on one side and living it out on the other. Peter tries to start talking in more detail about how to live in holiness. But he just can't stay there very long. Oh, he'll come back to it later in this letter. But here, in the beginning of his letter, he can only stay there about four sentences. Then he is right back into HOPE. In verse 18 he continues,

"You know that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors...with the precious blood of Christ...Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God."

It's a nice pattern, actually: HOPE-to-HOLINESS and back to HOPE.

It's almost like Peter knew that, even when we start in the hope of Christ, living out the call to holiness is hard. Almost like he knew that as we live out our hope, we stumble over stuff like pride and ego and selfishness. We run over people. We sin. We fail. We fall. But thanks be to God, the hope of the gospel lies on both sides like bookends that protect what's in between, bracketing the reality of life with the surrounding grace of the

gospel.

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, defines hope, first by talking about what it's not:

Hoping does not mean doing nothing. It is not fatalistic resignation. It means going about our assigned tasks, confident that God will provide the meaning and the conclusions. It is not compelled to work away at keeping up appearances with a bogus spirituality. It is the opposite of desperate and panicky manipulations, of scurrying and worrying.

And hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion or fantasy to protect us from our boredom or our pain.

Finally, he reiterates what hope is. [Hope] means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what he said he will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith. It is a willingness to let God do it his way and in his time.

Rome may have burned while Nero fiddled. But somewhere in that vicinity around Rome, in those days was this man with more important things to do with his time than fiddle. One of them was to write to churches needing a word of hope. The apostle Peter's letter written so long ago reminds us and challenges us and draws us:

1. It reminds us that we as a church are in both a privileged and a precarious position because of our freedom but also our affluence and comfort. We need to pray and learn from those who risk their very lives confessing Christ that we might be ready to do so as well.

2. It challenges how we live out our lives because we have come to know eternal hope in Christ...we strive to live the way God asks...not just the way we desire. In other words, we need to Experience Hope. Part of the vision of Experience Hope is an invitation to jump into God's Hope with our whole selves. To enter boldly into the hope that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's not about me; it's not about you. It's about God, and us living out that vision of hope.

Experience Hope is an invitation to move toward community and to move outside of ourselves and our own community by identifying with others who also need to experience hope. And what we find is that we begin to identify with people, whether it's locally or around the world, who either desperately need to experience hope or whose experience of hope, despite their circumstances, can be a model for us.

3. Peter draws us back again and again to the ground of our hope, Jesus Christ: *“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”* Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.