



**“OUR LIVING HOPE”
MID-WEEK BIBLE STUDY WITH
PASTOR HETRICK
1ST PETER 3:13-22**

“DO NOT FEAR WHAT THEY FEAR”

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” 1st Peter 3:13-15a

Let’s start with a statement that is almost unbelievable at this point:

“Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?”

Given that the writer has talked to slaves and others on the margins, and given the threat of living in an oppressive world, and a world of persecution for some, isn’t that a truly unrealistic belief then and now?

Are we being called to an unrealistic standard? Don’t be afraid if someone wants to harm you?

After this fantastic opener, the writer acknowledges harm may in fact be more than possible, and says, “But, do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” This is a reference to a passage in Isaiah- “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread.”

Isaiah 8:12 spoken to people facing an invasion. Surely a time for fear.

If we pause for a moment just in this passage, have you ever noticed that when we are afraid, or dreading something, how all consuming it can be? Fears can hold us in their grip, especially when they seem so much larger and more powerful than we are- like an invading army, or a powerful attacker. When we are governed by our fears, and anxieties, we tend to turn inward, seek only our own counsel, and make rash decisions. For the scientists in the room this is that “Fight or flight” animal brain at work. Sometimes very necessary, but here the writer is making an ethical statement: Fear may consume the hearts of those who seek to cause suffering, but let something different fill yours. Be ready to account for the hope that is in you.

Just before Isaiah 8:12 for example are these words:

“Band together, you peoples, and be dismayed; listen, all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed! Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, **for God is with us.**” Isaiah 8:9-10

That God of course, in Hebrew is “Immanu el”- God is with us, a word we call Jesus.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.
1st Peter 3:15a-17

Just before our passage in 1st Peter are these words that begin this teaching on suffering for doing good.

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For “Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” 1 Peter 3:8-12 NRSV, referring to Psalm 34:12-16.

We who believe that Jesus is the most complete revelation of the nature of God’s love are to look to Jesus as the model. But how? Fear can seem so tangible. Hope can seem so frail.

How does this passage allow us to grow in living this way when it is so easy to see this as an unreachable standard only Jesus can meet?

1st Peter speaks of following Christ’s pattern, which we know is not prosperity beyond measure, exceptionalism of exclusive blessing. It is not defined by riches, or domination. Some who promote the prosperity gospel or in our time “America First” will even go so far as to suggest that if their vision and way are not affirmed, they are being persecuted. Fears get stoked.

But that is not Jesus’ story.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 1st Peter 3:18-20

In honesty, we may not really want to live a life that encounters scorn or mockery, violence or misunderstanding. But "do not fear what they fear" Is intended to direct our hearts and minds to an attitude and behavior that sets us apart from those around us. The only thing we are to fear is God, and remember that that word "Fear" is about reverence, not danger. Keeping Christ as Lord is keeping Christ as the governor of our hearts and minds. When we do this, we will inherently live apart from the demands of empire, and the demands we can stoke in our own lives when we feel that we do not have enough, or what we want right now must be fed. When we fear what we are told to fear, our demands have crushing effects on other people, and resources and creation.

I have been thinking about that a lot these days as we are all grappling with our fears about the ongoing nature of the pandemic. We are weary of having limitations, we are afraid of what we cannot control. We have legitimate concerns about well being, physical and financial, mental and spiritual well being. It can be easy to fall into a pattern of "I am hurting so you must hurt too." Or to just push through to what I want that will save me from my feelings.

"Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing" opens this chapter. This lesson ends with: **Baptism, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him."** 1st Peter 3:21-22

Amidst the discussion of the work of Christ, have been interspersed these words- When someone asks the source of your hope, do it with gentleness. Keep your conscience clear.

Remember Christ suffered to bring you to God.

And baptism saves you. Not feeding any of those other gods.

Finally, the grounding source of our hope is something tangible- our baptism. At least that is how I see it. It's not just a moment and then the water dries.

Gordon McClellan writes that baptism is a process of growing closer to living a life like Jesus that begins with recognizing the meaning of our baptism. Our baptism tells us that before anything else, God loved us. What came first in each of our lives was love from God.

A love that is unaffected by whether or not we choose to respond or recognize that love. God loves us- period. We may not feel it. Some may not want it. Others may choose to ignore it. Regardless of our response love endures.

Of equal importance in this equation is an understanding that the purpose of baptism is not conversion: "Because God loved you first you need to love God back."

Baptism is really about perception. An invitation to live life through a new lens, from a perspective that is broader than our own limited assessment of self.

God's assessment of us is so positive Christ was willing to die for us.

The starting point for how we perceive our lives, our value and our worth is through this lens. This allows us to free our selves from the tyranny of self-pity and doubt which are often the by-products of suffering. Suffering that is not connected to a greater purpose or larger identity produces only self-pity, fear and doubt. "Do not fear what they fear."

In our baptism, Christ dwells in us. Fills our hearts with the heart of God. We are connected to a power greater than what oppresses- we are loved by God. With being so loved comes hope, and a confidence in God.

The more we are able to reveal our confidence in God through behavior choices, the more closely we grow into living like Jesus, whose whole life was a picture of living this way.

The older I get the less of an attention span I sometimes think I have.

But being centered in remembering my baptism, my hope, is for me about rejuvenation. Just like I can put moisturizer on my face to make that dry skin less so, the work of that water of baptism isn't just cleaning me up for another day, but about something deeper. Being restored, over and over. God's eternal promise.

And I remember that in our baptism we share in Christ's death and resurrection. Both. There are things in me that have to die, so that new life happens. I may want to take up those things that are my "go-to's" in adversity, but baptism joins me to Christ and calls me to remember what should fill my heart and mind.

The writer in 1st Peter says, unlike the people in Noah's day that did not obey God's will, Christ did obey. As an aside, we hear that even those who died in the flood were visited by Christ who redeemed them. If you remember those who were wicked died in the flood and then God promised never to do something like that again. In order to show that no one is beyond the saving gospel, Christ preached good news to them too. I realize this sounds a little phantasmagorical, but just take from it that the notion that there is not one person for whom the power of the cross will not reach.

We who follow Christ's pattern, living like Jesus, are to do what is right-obey God's commandments which Jesus summed up as loving God and our neighbor. In today's world, "Obey" is another word like "fear" that perhaps we cannot hear easily or well.

In Hebrew the word for "obey" means to "listen acutely."

God is not saying "Do this or else."

God is saying "listen closely to me."

And since life has a way of throwing the unexpected before us, in order to do as God desires for us and the world, we need to stay tuned in.

What other passages of Scripture call this listening to mind?

"Be Still and Know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

"My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures— then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones."

Proverbs 2:1-8

"Jesus said, "But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" Luke 11:28

"So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." Romans 10:17

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.""

Revelation 3:20-22

Do you hear that listening is always paired with something we need?

Knowing God has got this. Wisdom. Protection. Preservation. Blessing. Faith for the moment. Being fed. Not alone. Not vanquished. Things that without guidance are our fears.

God's providing is not a demonstrative show usually, but we receive what we need. From a God who loves us. That is why we can hope- the God who has done this, still will, and does. Remember that this letter was written to those who had to sustain hope over long times. Just like us.

I know that normally Pastor Schul is the caretaker of Emily Dickinson, but her poem, "Hope is the thing with feathers" seems like an appropriate ending to sum up God's work for us through Christ and the hope that God wants to fill our hearts with.

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.
I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.- Emily Dickinson

PRAYER: Lord, so many things push in around us trying to fill our hearts and minds with fears, and demands. It can be hard to keep hope, and to hear you. Come to us and perch in our souls, help us to listen closely and give us the will to persevere, and fill us with reminders of your hope in Christ that is never beyond us. Guide us to witness to your living hope in the world for the sake of all creation. Amen.