

“The Power of Living Hope”

I Peter 1:1-9/Matthew 13:24-30

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Text

Read I Peter 1:1-9

II. Introduction

Perhaps you might know the following biography.

When he was 7 years old his family was forced out of their home on a legal technicality, and he had to work to help support his family. At age 9 his mother died. At 22 he lost his job as a store clerk at no fault of his own. He wanted to go to law school, but his education wasn't good enough. At 23 he went into debt to become a partner in a small store. At 26 his business partner died, leaving him a huge debt that took years to repay. At 28, after courting a girl for four years he asked her to marry him. She said no. At 37, on this third try, he was elected to Congress. But 2 years later he lost his reelection. At 41 his 4 year old son died. At 45 he ran for Senate and lost. At 51 he was elected President of the United States. His name, of course, is Abraham Lincoln. He is a man considered by most people to be on the short list of the greatest presidents. And rightly his face is on Mount Rushmore, along with Washington, Jefferson, and Teddy Roosevelt.

The summary of Abraham Lincoln's life is amazing. Somehow he kept moving forward. And as I was pondering that this week I remembered when I had shared that summary before in a sermon. It was more than 40 years ago. It was before I went to seminary when I was working at the Cottage Lake Presbyterian Church north of Seattle.

Following that worship service over 40 years ago an elder in the church approached me. Bruce shared with me that the history of Abraham Lincoln's life is the “word” he needed most to hear that Sunday. He then went on to share that the “office politics” in the insurance company where he worked had created a lot of tension, and his job was in doubt (troubling words to a man in his mid-50s). He also shared that his investments that he had been working on for years had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. He also quietly shared that his 17 year old son Kevin was in a care facility with depression. Bruce looked at me and said that Sunday he had felt absolutely overwhelmed. He said he was exhausted and saw no positive future. But that as he listened to that biography of Abraham Lincoln, God had somehow touched his heart. And now he left worship with some type of life-giving hope.

III. Brief Exegesis

Hope does give a sense of life, doesn't it? It's like the beauty of a single note of a wind chime on a quiet evening. Or the wonder of a rainbow across a dark and stormy sky. Or a cool breeze that blows on a hot and sticky morning.

And a true hope is a living thing. A dead hope once brought life, but now makes no difference. But a living hope comes again and again to whisper just the right words in the different challenges of life.

Hope that gives life; that is a good way to begin our summer sermon series in I Peter. In the first chapter, verse 3, we get the key verse of the whole letter we call I Peter:

“Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ! By God’s great mercy God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” That verse is the theme that will run through the whole book. It's about a living hope that gives life.

We need hope. Life is hard at times. Abraham Lincoln knew that. My friend Bruce knew that. We know that. And the Christians who first read this letter called I Peter knew that. They lived in the rural, inland parts of what was then Asia Minor. Today we call it Turkey. The little Christian churches there were growing, but life was hard. Christian faith made them different from their pagan neighbors. And as is usually the case, people just don't like different. So there were persecutions, prejudices, and corrupt court systems. It wasn't something that was initiated by the Roman government. That would come later. Rather this was more “home grown” oppression, neighbors against neighbors. And in some ways that's more painful, as people you know become the bullies who lead the persecution.

And so these initial readers of I Peter were overwhelmed, exhausted, and “at the end of their rope.” They saw no positive way forward. They were discouraged. They were in danger of just giving up their Christian faith, disbanding their church communities, and returning to the pagan temples and ways of life all around them.

But then they get this letter. It comes from Christians in Rome. The church leaders there knew Jesus' disciple Peter. And they knew about suffering and persecution for their faith. Peter died for his faith in Rome. Others followed; martyrs. But the Christian presence in Rome did not disappear. It is said that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” And so it was. And so it was no small thing that these small churches in the margins and back woods of Asia Minor get a letter from the Christians who also had suffered in the capital city of Rome. Perhaps they had heard stories of courage and faith about Peter and the church in Rome. Now they get a letter from them.

And so Christians in Asia Minor gather in their churches and this letter called I Peter is read to them. And after it's read and discussed, it's handed on to the next church. And then to the next. In fact, it was so valued by the Christians there, in time it became part of the New Testament.

The beginning of I Peter affirms three themes that will run through the whole letter.

First, they are resident aliens, exiles from their true home, “square pegs in round holes,” because their faith and values and life style are different than the pagan community all around them. They don’t fit in. And that’s as it should be. Salvation isn’t just about “going to heaven.” It’s also about a way of life. It’s about the ways of eternal life beginning to be lived here and now. And that makes them different than those around them, just as Jesus was different than those around him. And it makes us different than those around us who serve other gods. All followers of Jesus can sing “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.” Resident aliens.

Second, this letter affirms that life is hard at times. There is suffering and persecution. Sometimes things happen that are not fair. Bad things do happen to good and faithful people. Followers of Jesus don’t live their lives in some type of protective bubble. And in fact, as is the case for the first readers of I Peter, Christian faith may result in persecution as people reject the way of God, just as they rejected Jesus Christ.

Bad things do happen to good and faithful people. And if you are in the midst of a struggle it’s important to hear that. Sometimes we move in the direction of believing that brokenness and loss are results of some bad choice. I must have done something to deserve this. And sometimes that can be true; poor choices do have consequences. But the whole book of Job was written to affirm that bad things do happen to good and faithful people. And I Peter does the same thing; the suffering and persecution the members of those little 1st C churches in Asia Minor are enduring is real, but they are not to blame.

And third, there is power in the living hope of the Christian faith. The final word is not the cross but the empty tomb, not death but resurrection, not Good Friday but Easter Sunday. The theology of I Peter is not interested in Jesus’ teaching or miracles. Rather I Peter is about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I Peter leans into the resurrection of Jesus as the promise of God to us. Just as Jesus knew the suffering of the cross that gave way to resurrection, so our suffering will give way to resurrection and new life. Our lives will not end in some type of broken mess. Rather there is eternal life, the rest of “the story of our lives,” when all things will be made new. The resurrection of Jesus is the power of a living hope for each of us. The song of Isaiah in our call to worship is right; “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Is. 40:31) The power of living hope.

I think Jesus had this in mind when he told the parable of “the wheat and the weeds:”

First, the field is not all wheat. There are weeds in the field. In fact, there are a lot of weeds. And the weeds are different than the wheat. And as the weeds spread the wheat can feel like resident aliens.

Second, there is a struggle between the wheat and weeds. It’s not as easy life for the wheat. Weeds happen. And they spread. The wheat might feel overwhelmed by the weeds. And if you garden at all you know how hardy weeds are.

But third, it will not always be that way. The way of the God who plants the field will finally come to pass. The weeds will be gathered and separated from the wheat and burned. And the wheat will come to know fullness of life in the glory of God. That too is a living hope.

IV. Theological Reflections

As I thought about the power of living hope in these first few verses of I Peter a couple things came to mind.

One is that truthful Christian faith is about real life. As Christianity has spread across Africa I have heard countless missionaries from there say “Christian faith is a mile wide and an inch deep.” By that they mean there is a very wide range of all different kinds of beliefs, but a very shallow understanding of life and faith. And in that “inch deep theology” grows the dangerous belief of the “prosperity gospel.” This belief tells people that God has rich blessings for them: health, riches, family, power...a life of ease and beautiful things. And all you have to do is believe and ask (and generously give money to the preacher and the church). Christianity is “sold” with the promise that following Jesus will lead to prosperity in this life.

By now you may be thinking, “Hey, that’s not just in Africa. That’s in this country too.” And you would be right. The prosperity gospel is on television and radio and pod casts. It’s in books and cheap movies. And it’s preached in pulpits around here.

The deep, real faith of Christianity in I Peter runs head long into the thin theology of the prosperity gospel. Life is hard. Christians don’t fit into the secular and pagan cultures all around them. And suffering happens, sometimes as a consequence of Christian faith. There are joys in this life where there is love and kindness and justice and peace. But the ultimate hope of all Christians is in the future, when the glory of God comes in its fullness and there is eternal life. Anything less is marketing a cheap knockoff of the real thing. And in that real thing is the power of living hope.

Another thing is this; we catch glimpses of that living hope now. It’s when God’s kingdom breaks into this world here and there. My friend Bruce had that experience 40 years ago in the life of Abraham Lincoln. I have had those experiences. Maybe you have too. But you have to pay attention to see them.

A deacon here at 1st Church told me about delivering flowers after worship a few years ago. Often the flowers after worship are taken by our deacons to nursing homes, or hospitals or one of our shut-ins. And that’s great. But this deacon told me she wanted to do something different. So she started taking the flowers to businesses that deal with the public as a type of thank you: restaurants, gas stations, grocery store employee break rooms. So one Sunday she decided she would take the flowers to Walmart. Walking in with a vase of flowers she asks an employee to see the manager. A call was made. In a few minutes the manager appears. The deacon then tells the manager the flowers are a thank you for their service to the public. It was then that the stunned manager started to cry. She told our deacon that when people ask to see her there’s always an angry problem or complaint. Never before had someone said “thank you” with flowers.

That's the power of the living hope breaking out in all that is Walmart. Imagine that. And it happens all around. We just have to pay attention. And even better, share in that living hope ourselves.