

“Alive in the Spirit”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 10, 2020

5th Sunday of Easter / Mother’s Day

Psalm 23

Rev. John Wahl

1 Peter 3:8-18

During this most unusual Easter season, we have been looking at this most unique and timely Epistle of I Peter where the Christian community is encouraged – in the midst of their current suffering – to persevere and maintain hope. The letter makes clear that the church, as it is being met by antagonism and outright persecution from those among whom they live, still seeks to be faithful. To such a setting and people the writer offers assurance and encouragement that no matter what their present experience may say to the contrary, Jesus Christ is Lord; and so hope stays alive.

Most readers of the New Testament are familiar with the Apostle Paul’s triad of faith, hope, and love – and his insistence that the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13). But for the audience of this letter, the more important of these gifts is hope; for in the midst of their troubled lives, it is difficult to keep hope alive.

And yet, as we are realizing today, maintaining hope for a better future does not take away the reality of the present suffering. Belief in either the inherent goodness of humanity to overcome obstacles, or the power of God to affect change – or a combination of both – does not necessarily mean that, today, justice is being served. Instead we are surrounded by reminders of inequities in the pain and suffering of our world: by race, gender, and socio-economic strata to name a few. Where is the hope in that?

These are not easy questions to answer any more for I Peter’s readers than they are for us. The author offers two responses. First is the reminder that righteous suffering is modeled in Christ’s own death. On the cross, the righteous one suffered for us, and so our own suffering imitates the suffering of Christ and thus joins us to him. The second is the encouragement to bear this suffering and do good by not repaying evil with evil. You may not be

able to control the evil you encounter, but you can control how you respond by continuing to do good even in the midst of pain.¹

Of course, things are not the same now as they likely would have been back then. Christians here, today, are no longer persecuted for being resident aliens and a minority faith. We would not expect to suffer because of where we are from or how we choose to worship. Still, the daunting challenge that now confronts us: a global pandemic that has turned our world upside-down – though it comes from a different source – is no less painful. How can we maintain hope amid true suffering?

Living with the uncertainty we are currently facing – not knowing how long we will need to remain physically distanced, or how many will end up being infected and die, or even what a new normal will one day look like – this letter reminds us that the rewards of a Christian life are often not immediate. When we are instructed not to repay evil with evil but to continue doing good, it offers no guarantee of more wealth, friends, or popularity. It does not mean that all suffering will suddenly disappear. But it may mean that our choices and actions will help to create a better and more just world.

Though the actions we have been asked to take, and sacrifices we need to make, in the midst of the suffering and pain that now faces us require individual commitment, they are really about the welfare of the communities of which we are a part. The hand hygiene, face coverings, and social distancing are just as much, if not more, for others around us as they are for ourselves. Some people have experienced greater suffering than others; the effects have not been shared equally. But as the church, we remember that as Christ suffered for all, we participate in his suffering through our own; and therefore in his redemption as well.

What are the communal practices, even in the throes of social distancing, that we can do to build community connection, relationship and belonging that encourages hope? What are the opportunities to accompany each other in ways that are visibly instructive to a world that so tends to separate and isolate? In what ways might this passage offer us an opportunity to take seriously the power of mutuality and faith. In these unconventional, unique and trying times, how can we help each other to see that Christ is Lord?

¹ James Boyce from *WorkingPreacher.com*

I believe the answer is hope; a living hope by which we can continue to do good for the sake of one another. This is possible because our hope is kept alive in the Spirit. As the people of God, we have an unbreakable bond that is strengthened through our common calling as imitators of Christ. We give of ourselves because he gave of himself to us; we endure trials and suffering because Christ has done the same for us. This means that we encourage and support one another in the community; walking alongside every step of the way.

It is fitting that, often, the chosen Psalm on Mother's Day is the 23rd; because for so many of us, it was our mothers – or those who cared for us like a mother – who led us to green pastures and still waters, who restored our souls, who set food before us and welcomed us home. While we often picture shepherds as men – or younger boys – their role of caretaker is aligned more typically with females; those who tucked us in, wiped our tears, quenched our thirst and filled our plate.

Green pastures and still waters are not just images of pleasant memories, but they symbolize our present-day desires to be renewed and refreshed. In this Psalm, we have the promise of a God who can help us on our life's journey to find the love and care we might remember from younger days and seemingly simpler times; but which can remain our living hope: our reassurance that Christ is our risen and living Lord.

Hope and reassurance are certainly at the heart of this beloved Psalm. It is rooted in the real-life experiences of the pastoral nomads of old; a way of life that required seasonal movements with the flock up into the hills and back down through the valleys. Rather than being about quiet solitude, it was a life of enduring trials rather than avoiding them; about defending those entrusted to you; about finding and preserving the elements necessary for life in its fullness.²

So, while the shepherd might occasionally experience solace, it would be more the exception than the rule. Lying down in green pastures means having been brought there in the first place; like being led beside still waters and down the right paths. Even in the darkest valleys, in those times when we might feel stuck in suffering, the shepherd is standing with us; guiding and comforting us; keeping hope alive.

² Bobby Morris from *WorkingPreacher.com*

This comforting presence can sometimes be difficult for us to perceive when we are in the dark valley, surrounded by suffering, feeling like there is no way forward. But, the most important thing about suffering – beyond the fact that it allows us to remember and imitate the suffering of Christ – is that God does not want us to remain there. Instead we are anointed with oil, our cup is filled to overflowing. This happens not by avoiding the dark valley, but by walking through it; not by putting our heads in the sand, nor by repaying evil and pain with more of the same.

No, our hope is a living hope. There is suffering in the world; and right now it is all around us. We live in a time of great pain and uncertainty. We may find ourselves in the dark valley and might not know the way out, but we won't stay here forever. There will be a day when we will again spend mother's day, and other days of celebration, with our families; there will be Sundays when we again gather together in this sanctuary. God is not done with us yet; renewal and rebirth will happen. Just not yet; nor in a way or a time frame that we yet understand.

And so, thanks be to God that our hope does not depend on our circumstances. Instead, we have a living hope; one that will undoubtedly propel us forward; hope in a caretaker that protects us, feed us, and then welcomes us home. Amen.