

“A Living Hope”

“By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ...”

During this time of social distancing, we are employing every means available to us to stay connected, to support and encourage one another during these uncertain and difficult days:

- Many of us are meeting via Zoom (our Congregational Council met this way this past week) and using it for all sorts of social gatherings.
- Social media has become increasingly popular; there is increased traffic on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and other ways for people to connect.
- Phone calls have become a vital lifeline for people who do not have access to the internet; many of our people in the congregation are connected with each other and being comforted by the familiar voices on the other end of the line.
- People have even returned to the most basic form of communication: the written letter; trips to the mailbox to see if a letter has arrived are often the highlight of the day!

This 21st Century return to letter writing is a modern-day expression of communication that was frequent used in biblical times, especially in the New Testament Epistles. Twenty-one of the 27 books of the New Testament are letters written to churches and individuals when physical gatherings were impossible—either because of distance or imprisonment. New Testament letters were written to offer support, encouragement, teaching, and at times chastisement and calls to repentance.

- “The New Testament letters were written as if their authors were actually speaking to their audiences ... [their] purpose was to instruct and persuade its readers, and its intended aim was to enable those readers to make decisions that conformed to the faith.” – Robert W. Wall.

Thirteen of the New Testament letters are attributed to Paul, who often wrote from prison (*“Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.”* – Ephesians 6:19-20). Other epistles are attributed to James, John, and Jude; one, the Letter to the Hebrews, is anonymous. Two of the letters bear the name of the apostle Peter, the first person to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36). The First Letter of Peter – which will be read in worship throughout the Easter season – is a letter of encouragement *“written for churches that are alienated from the surrounding society, and for Christians who are slandered for their faith, providing comfort for believers in troubled times.”* (David Bartlett). It is a letter that offers us a profound message of hope in the troubled times in which we find ourselves during this COVID-19 pandemic.

The author identifies himself as *“an apostle of Jesus Christ,”* one who was *“sent out”* by Christ to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). It is addressed *“to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,”* regions of Asia Minor where churches had been established in the First Century. *“Exiles of the Dispersion”* were Jews living

outside of the land of Israel, aliens who were temporary residents in the Roman provinces of norther Asia Minor; such exiles often suffered the hardships of being alien residents. But their status in the eyes of the world is immediately contrasted with their status in the eyes of God; for Peter proclaims that they *“have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.”* (1:2). Their identity as the people of God will be a major theme throughout this letter and will be the basis for their assurance that *“grace and peace [will] be yours in abundance.”*

- “First Peter reflects the rapid expansion of the early church in Asia Minor. The writer explores issues of community, mission, and suffering—issues these young faith communities may have been facing.” – Raymond Schultz.

The letter opens with a thanksgiving that is typical of New Testament letters; in Peter’s thanksgiving, the themes of suffering and hope come together, themes that will permeate the entire letter. The thanksgiving begins with a benediction, a word of praise to God for the ways in which Christians have been elected and redeemed:

- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” – 1:3-5.

The writer, who prayed for grace and peace for his readers, now insists that God has already provided mercy to those who are chosen. In the face of distress and suffering, what God’s mercy provides is “new birth” and “living hope.” In the New Testament, there is a significant difference between human hope and God’s hope: human hope carries no assurances that what is hoped for will come to fruition (“I hope the weather will be nice tomorrow), whereas hope that is rooted in God is sure and certain: *“... hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* (Romans 5:5). Hope lives because it is based in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, his triumph over death:

- “Hope lives because death cannot overcome it. Hope lives because even in the face of tribulation it does not back down or grow faint. Living hope is hope that gives life.” – Bartlett.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the grounds for the new life of the believer. However difficult earthly life may be, God’s promise is signed, sealed, and guaranteed.

The claim that Christians have an inheritance in heaven has a rich background in the Old Testament and is also attested elsewhere in the New Testament epistles:

- “The LORD is my portion and my cup; you hold my lot.” – Psalm 16:5.
- “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” – Romans 8:15-17.
- “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” – Galatians 4:6-7.

The qualities of this heavenly inheritance that is *"imperishable, undefiled, and unfading"* suggests what it means to say that Christians are *"born anew to a living hope."* It is a "living hope" because it is rooted in the living Christ, *"the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,"* the good news that is at the heart of the Christian faith. Christian hope is not rooted in wishful thinking; it is not a future event that may or may not happen. Christian hope is rooted in the assurance that Christ is risen, and that because he lives we too shall live in the assurance that we are *"protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* It is the living hope that is bestowed upon us when in Holy Baptism we are *"reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the Body of Christ."* (ELW Holy Baptism).

- "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." – Romans 6:3-5.

This living hope that is rooted in the heart of the Gospel which is the good news of resurrection of Jesus Christ is the reason why we can rejoice *"even if you a little while you have had to suffer various trials"* (1:6). Jesus had warned his disciples that they would share in his suffering for their proclamation of the Gospel (*"You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name."* – Luke 21:16-17), but that this suffering will be for *"a little while,"* which reminds Christians that suffering will not be the last word for them nor will it destroy them; the time between Christ's resurrection and his return will not be a long time coming: *"But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."* (Luke 21:18-19). The present difficulties are bracketed and made relative by the abiding promises of God in Jesus Christ. As gold is refined through fire, so also genuine faith is refined through suffering:

- "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried." – Psalm 66:10.
- "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness." – Malachi 3:3.

Genuine faith is more precious than gold because genuine faith is imperishable, while even the most precious gold will one day perish. While Christians may face "trials and temptations" as they seek to be faithful to God's calling, they have the assurance that through faith God's power will preserve the faithful.

- "Christians can see the resurrection of Christ as evidence for the imperishable, secure inheritance that awaits them in heaven. They are also reminded that God's power will protect them until they attain this inheritance ... It reminds us that no Christian seeks the 'testing' of his or her faith. Nor does God set up such trials as an obstacle course or entrance exam. But Christians have known from the beginning that no genuine faith will exist without them." – Pheme Perkins.

Although the fullness of Christ's glory is yet to be revealed, those who are reborn to a living hope even now have the privilege of loving Christ, being faithful to Christ, and rejoicing in him: *"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, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."* (1:8-9). Faith is what protects Christians as they await their final salvation, but faith is also the way in which

Christians relate in the present to the Christ they will see only in the future. Faith is God's gift for God's people; it is "*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" (Hebrews 11:1).

- "Our hope is not set on possessions or an inheritance here on earth but on an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and does not fade away. We possess this good eternally, only we cannot see it yet. These are mighty and precious words, and I contend that whoever can grasp their meaning will not be very concerned about temporal goods and pleasures ... On earth there is no pleasure so great that it does not fade in time. People grow tired of everything, but this good is different. This is all ours through the mercy of God in Christ, if we believe it, and it is given to us freely." – Martin Luther, 1523.

The promise for Christians is that they are heirs to an inheritance that is being kept safe in heaven and that the good news of salvation and new life is present for believer now even as they await the last day. "*It is the promise of the 'then' that brings hope and joy to the 'now,' most importantly and promisingly into any now that is marked and marred by suffering, by trials, and by testing.*" (Karl Jacobson).

Peter's words of hope for people whose lives were "marred by suffering, by trials, and by testing" in the First Century are also words that are written to us this "now that is marked by fear and uncertainty the likes of which we have never experienced. When we read Scripture, we are always mindful that God's Word always has two audiences: the original audience who first heard these words spoken to them, and the Word that is being proclaimed to us today, because God's Word is a living Word rooted in our faith in the living Christ. This is the reason why we end the reading of God's Word in worship with "*the Word of the Lord,*" acknowledging what we are hearing is the "*Word of God, Word of Life*" which is the good news for us as it was good news for the people who first heard it proclaimed to them.

- "Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yet, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ's power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus." – Luke Timothy Johnson.

At a time when we are exploring every means at our disposal to stay connected and keep the lines of communication open, the Word of God continues to speak to us a work of living hope that is rooted in the living Christ, the good news that as God was present with God's people in "ages past" God will be our hope "in years to come," the word of living hope that is ours through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which we have been "*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*"

Amen.