

Be Prepared

Texts: John 14:15-21, I Peter 3:13-22

Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – May 17, 2020

Rev. Michael F. Atzert

Our text for this morning from I Peter gives us some wonderful things to think about on this Lord's Day. The people to whom Peter's letter is written are facing some sort of persecution and mockery for their faith. They are suffering for that in which they believe. At that time, Christianity was not the world's leading religion. It was new, it was growing, but did not nearly have the support and draw that it did later on. Yet, Peter is telling the believers to not give up, to continue to do the good they are doing, even and especially if they are suffering.

"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

We know from history that the early Christians suffered terrible persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. We know that they were beaten, imprisoned, tortured, killed, and were subjected to a great deal of suffering. Yet, they remained faithful. They believed in Jesus Christ so strongly that they were willing to endure whatever came to them for the sake of the Gospel. They did not lose heart - they did not back down. They were prepared for whatever came to them, always ready to make an accounting and defend their faith.

James Boyce, Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, gives us some additional perspective. He writes, "The trumpets, the fanfare, and the antiphonal shouts of "He is risen! He is risen, indeed!" have receded into the

background. It is now the sixth Sunday of Easter; by now it may be somewhat difficult to sustain the excitement and positive outlook that only a few short weeks ago seemed so ready at hand. By now we have begun to settle in once again into the drudgery, the lack-luster, the “same-old, same-old” of the mundane daily tasks and worries that characterize life in the real world.

If we recognize any of those sentiments or feelings, then perhaps we can understand in some way what must have been the experience of the recipients of the letter of Peter, living as they were toward the end of the first century. Our distance from the celebration of Easter, even though only a few weeks away, may offer a glimpse of what must have been the experience of this people.

Living now some seventy years after that first Easter event, they can perhaps be forgiven for having difficulty keeping alive the freshness of that first Easter announcement of our Lord’s Resurrection and the accompanying promise of new life in him. But their distance from Easter and the accompanying delay of Christ’s return are not the only problems they face.

The letter makes clear that this community, as it seeks to remain faithful and to live lives that befit a good conscience, is constantly beset by the antagonism and outright persecution of those among whom they live. The double whammy of a fading sense of the resurrection and the very real experience of daily suffering are almost more than they can bear. To such a setting and people, the writer addresses a word of encouragement through the restatement and assurances of the promissory implications of Easter.

It perhaps goes without saying, but this people, and perhaps we as well, can afford to hear the announcement reaffirmed once again. No matter what present experience may imply to the contrary, Jesus Christ is Lord” (From Internet. www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2089 05/13/20).

What about us? Where are we - individually and as the Church of Jesus Christ - in our faith, now that we are weeks beyond Easter – and a very different Easter that it was for us? Are we prepared to give an answer – are we secure enough to be able to point another toward the hope of God through Jesus Christ? Are we willing to continue to do good and suffer for what is right - with gentleness and reverence - so that the light of Jesus Christ may shine? Perhaps many of us do not even want to consider these questions because we know how we would answer them. We do not feel like we know enough to defend our faith. We do not know enough Scripture to be able to point someone in the direction of Jesus Christ. When suffering or even the slightest hint of persecution for our faith comes, we shy away. No, we run - intentionally and as quickly as we can - for cover so we do not have to be made uncomfortable.

Friends, that is not what Peter is saying here. We are each called to be secure enough in our faith that we can share - that we can give an answer for our hope to whomever asks us for one, especially during these days. We need to bring that hope. We need to bring that peace of God that is like no other. With gentleness and love and patience and respect. All we need is a willing heart and spirit to share.

For God has promised us that He will be us no matter what, that He will give us the strength that we need, and our efforts to bring hope to others – to share the gift of Jesus Christ to those who are searching – will not be in vain. In the first Scripture reading for this morning, which Roger read, we see that promise with the coming of God's Holy Spirit. "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."

With the Holy Spirit in us and working through us, we are able to make our witness with the gentleness and reverence that Peter calls us to. God will help us through. God will be with us if we suffer because of our faith. God will be with us in pandemic and outside of pandemic.

And do you know why? Because God was with His Son, Jesus Christ, when He suffered. During those times in our lives when we are afraid or feel uncertain or experience some type of suffering, when we are hesitant to be uncomfortable in sharing or affirming our faith, we have to remember the ultimate sacrifice that Christ made for each of us on the cross at Calvary. Jesus was willing to suffer for our sins - pay the price for us once and for all. With the suffering He endured and the pain He had to go through for us, should we not respond to God in faithfulness ourselves?

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.” If Christ loved us so much to do that, we have a responsibility to be prepared to share that love with others. To give the reason for the hope we have, when called upon. To be faithful in all things. May we do as God says. Let us pray...

Ever-present and Eternal God, we thank You for the challenges in Your Word to us this day. We pray, Lord, for strength, for faith, for wisdom, and for the courage to be in a position to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have. We praise You for that hope in Jesus Christ. We thank You for Your Spirit, that You have promised will always be with us. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.