

Sermon
May 3, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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A Living Hope
I Peter 1:1-12

I Peter is a letter written to the churches in five provinces in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century. Its message is especially appropriate for us today for it was written “*to exiles scattered to the four winds*” to provide encouragement and hope in a time of struggle. As we work our way through this letter over the next several weeks while our nation is beginning to reopen in the midst of a pandemic unlike we have ever experienced before my prayer is these words will provide encouragement and hope to us in our time of struggle as individuals, as a faith community and as a nation.

I Peter begins with a blessing. “*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...*” What does it mean to be given *a new birth into a living hope*? If something is living it has life. Life is what makes it possible for something to take in food or nourishment, to get energy from that nourishment and to grow. To be living is to be growing, moving, changing. All new life begins with a new birth that bodes a new creation.

Think about plants. Plants grow - sprout, produce, and expand. We know they are living plants because we see the yield, the results. All around us we see the signs of new life as plants are growing and flowers are blooming this spring.

When we look into the face of an infant we see new life. Living beings move and make sounds, they open their mouths and their eyes. They respond to the world around them. They are living human beings. And just looking into their faces gives us hope for the world. Just

this week a friend of my daughters gave birth in the midst of this pandemic to a healthy baby girl. Just seeing her picture gave me hope!

Norman Cousins was a diplomat under three presidential administrations, an editor of *Saturday Review of Literature*, and described as a global peacemaker — having been granted the United Nations Peace Medal. He thought a lot about hope during more than one serious illness. He said that if you have hope, you make plans. Hope points people toward what life can be, despite the uncertainties, disabilities, or suffering of the present. Hope propels people forward in life, even if they must advance on crutches, or on a walker, or in a wheelchair.

(<https://sermons.com/sermon/a-living-hope-if-it-hadn-t-been-for-easter/1443503>) Friends, that is the living hope provided for us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that living hope propels us forward even in the face of a pandemic.

The living hope that Peter describes has three specific qualities. First, a living hope is ours because we worship a living God. God provides life for each of us. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the promise of a living hope. Think about the Easter message. Jesus appeared to Mary and to Peter. He appeared to the disciples. He ate with them. They touched him. He talked to them. He moved among them. He was very much alive in their midst. Seeing him they experienced a living hope. When it was time for Jesus to ascend to his Father he promised - *I am with you always*. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came among the believers. Peter recognized a living hope among them and spoke of its power. On that day of Pentecost the living God changed three thousand people's lives forever.

Every day since the living God manifest in the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - has continued to offer a living hope to the world through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our hope

does not wait until the end of time but is active and vigorous. It is what fuels the life and activity of a believer. It is the Spirit breathing life into the church of Jesus Christ. We have a living hope because we experience that life made whole because of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, a living hope is ours because of the inheritance that has been promised us. This inheritance means we are forward focused. We know and believe that something better is coming. Our inheritance is *imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*. It is secure - kept in heaven for us by the power of God through faith.

Think a minute about what an inheritance is. It is a gift given from someone to you. It is something to look forward to. An inheritance is not just about material things. We also inherit characteristics, traits that make us who we are. The older we get the more aware we usually become of what we have inherited from our ancestors. The inheritance God has for us is a living hope that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our inheritance promises life eternal with God. Life with God here on earth and in the future is our inheritance.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer, and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what Scriptures she would like read and what she wanted to be wearing. The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order, and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked.

"Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn't Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie. Something with substance. So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'Something better is coming, so keep your fork, too.'"

The pastor's eyes were filled with tears as he hugged the woman goodbye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that that woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She knew that something better was coming.

At the funeral, people were walking by the woman's casket, and they saw the pretty dress she was wearing and her favorite Bible and the fork placed in her right hand. Over and over, the pastor heard the question, "What's with the fork?" And over and over, he smiled. During his message, the pastor told the people of the conversation he had with the woman shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork, and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it, either. He was right.

So the next time you reach down for your fork, let it remind you that there is something better coming. (https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/prINTER_friendly_installment.asp?installment_id=2414)

The living hope we have as Christians promises us that there is something better coming so we should spend our lives living every day to the fullest anticipating the future.

And that takes us to the most important thing Peter said about a living hope. We have a living hope because of the living God who promises us that something better is coming but this living hope demands something of us. We are to be joy-filled... *in this you rejoice*. Christians rejoice even though there are trials and sufferings. Peter sees the struggles as opportunities to have faith deepened. And when that faith is deepened the result is *praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed*.

Peter used the example of gold that was refined by fire. When gold is heated the impurities rise to the top and the greater density of the gold sinks to the bottom. Our faith is refined in the same way when we are tested and we can allow our impurities - our struggles, our questioning, our trials and temptations - to separate from the gold of our faith and form into a living hope that gives us joy.

We know this joy because we love God in Christ and we believe in him. We have joy because of the promise of salvation. Have you ever known a new Christian? You know, someone who never knew about Jesus before and has just heard the good news. That good news has changed their life. They have a joy that is contagious. They believe the gospel message because they have come through trials and temptations to get here. We have all heard of people who have had dramatic changes in their lives - prisoners who have found Jesus. Isn't it sad that we so often are skeptical of their joy, their true conversion? Their excitement and joy can

frighten us. But friends, they know what it means to have a living hope because they were lost and are now found. They have experienced a relationship with the living God that has changed them. They have hope for the future because they now know they have an inheritance that is theirs. Their joy is the result of a living hope.

As we anticipate the date and time when we can get out and about again. When we can gather together as a community of faith in one place to worship our living God. My prayer is that when that day comes the joy that will fill our hearts will show the world that we have a living hope that sustained us even in exile. Let us remember that we have something to look forward to, something to live for that brings us great joy. We have a living hope! And that living hope propels us forward into the unknown with joy in our hearts. Thanks be to God!