

## *“Hope Springs Eternal”*

*Psalm 99; 1 Peter 1:1-5*

May 22, 2022

I have to confess, I’m a bit of a fantasy-nerd. That is to say that I enjoy books like the Wheel of Time, Dune and the Lord of the Rings. There’s a scene in one of the movie adaptations of that trilogy that has a moment that is truly breathtaking. It’s in the “Two Towers” movie and it comes when the good guys are surrounded in a castle. They’ve fought valiantly but the opposing side is just too great a force. They’re beaten, they know it. A group of them decide to just ride out into the massive swarms of enemies, taking out who they can as they die. It’s a real, take a last stand kind of moment. But, as they say, it’s always darkest before dawn – just as that grim decision is made and the final ride about to occur – reinforcements arrive behind the enemy’s lines. The battle changes direction and, ta da, the good guys win. But what is so spectacular to see is the moment when Gandalf, the good wizard, arrives on his white horse, Shadowfax. It is a moment replete with hope. The tide is turning, the good guys will win in the end.

Man, do I wish we could get a moment like that in real life. Wouldn’t it be great when the stresses of this world have us pushed to the edges, when some diagnosis or family crisis sees us depleted and beaten to see some wizard appear on the horizon with a friendly army to help you out of whatever situation you find yourself in? Wouldn’t that be great?

Well, this passage from First Peter can be like that moment for any of us once we properly understand what is being said to us. This passage affords us an amazing hope that somehow, someday, we’ll make it through difficult times and do so all because we’re joined by a good and merciful God who loves us. Because that’s what the people of God needed most at the time. As Peter sits down to write this letter, things have gotten dicey for the Christian communities at the time.

In order to understand this, we’ve got to understand a bit of what was going on at the time. Sometimes we forget that Christianity grew in the real world in real time and space, so to speak, when things were happening. For the Christians, Rome proved to be quite an enemy to the faith, early on. Beginning with the Emperor Nero, Christians began to be persecuted on occasion for being atheists. Now, their understanding of what an atheist is differs from ours. To the Romans, an atheist was anyone who wouldn’t worship the Roman gods. We know from Paul’s writings that Christians regularly abstained from participating in feasts for the Roman gods. This allowed them to be singled out for persecution. But then, Nero dies and Rome sees the year of three emperors as nobody could quite nail down the job and everyone kept getting killed. Finally, a man named Vespasian takes over leadership of Rome and one of his first acts is to send his eldest son to Jerusalem to sack it. So, Titus comes and does again to Jerusalem what the Babylonians did generations before – Titus razes the Temple and burns the remainder of the city to the ground. I don’t think we can rightly imagine the devastation. Thankfully, we here in America haven’t seen invading armies. We don’t know the terribly tragedy of being displaced from our homes, not knowing where to go or what to do. This is precisely what would’ve faced many of the “exiles” that Paul addresses at the beginning of his letter. These were people who were faced with extreme upheaval, chaos in their lives the likes of which I hope none of us in this sanctuary are ever faced with.

Now, thankfully at present, we don’t have that kind of upheaval in our lives. But that’s not to say that life here in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is all that wonderful at present. By the Grace of God, we’re emerging from a pandemic but the scars of the thing are already beginning to show. We’ve got kids struggling in classrooms to make up from nearly 2 years of quarantine-type learning. We’ve got rampant inflation, gas well up over \$4 now. On top of that, we’ve got a war in Europe raging and, if history is any indicator, that doesn’t necessarily bode well for world peace as European conflicts often become larger in scope. And those are just the “meta” issues facing us today. What’s going on in your life? Now, hopefully everything is well in your life and this sermon, while nice, won’t hit home. But, as your pastor, I know that’s not the case in all of our lives. There are difficult diagnoses, cancers, family situations, you name it, all of which work against us. More than anything, we need to see Gandalf on that hill in that amazing white horse ready to save us from the devouring hordes.

That’s exactly what these opening verses of this letter do. Our author would’ve known what it was like to see hope emerge in a difficult time. Remember, Peter was a real person, not some character in a fantasy book. A fisherman, Peter’s life was changed one day as Jesus got into their boat and informed them that, soon, they’d become fishers of men. From that early call, Peter would’ve travelled with Jesus and, thus, he’d have seen

some amazing things- water turned into wine, a blind man's sight restored, Lazarus raised from the dead. It was sure to seem as though life was just going to get better and better with Jesus by their side.

But then, the tides, turned. Jesus is arrested. Then tried. Then crucified. Dead and buried. Ah, but on the third day, He arose from the dead and lived and broke bread with the disciples for 40 days before ascending to heaven where he sits on the right hand of God the Father almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead, right?

So, as Peter writes this letter, he writes to a group of people dispirited and broken. Maybe you find yourself in just a similar situation. Maybe you don't quite know what the next six months will bring and, to be honest, you're frightened of some of the potential outcomes. Then this letter, this sermon is for you. After naming the recipients and author of the letter, Peter begins with an ascription of praise. "*Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" IT really is just a convention of the letter to begin with this ascription of praise but I think it gives us a good guide for where to begin when things start getting dark – PRAISE.

Praise is simple to express admiration of and what better way to greet our Holy God. How often, when trouble hits, do we think to praise God? Maybe we should. Peter does here even knowing that, to his letter's recipients, things likely looked very bleak.

But praise is the appropriate beginning for anything to do with our God. I can remember once being in a hospital room with a congregant and his wife. His wife had fought her illness valiantly but, sadly, things were reaching the end. A difficult decision was made – the machines would be turned off. Before the nurse came into the room to do that, the family gathered for a prayer. It was the husband who began the prayer as things would turn out. The man, a man of great faith, began by praising God for his goodness, his providence and his mercy. At the time, being less Biblically astute, it seemed like an odd choice. I mean after all, this is not the easiest time to praise and thank God for his attributes, yet that's exactly what the man did. But now, as I read the Psalms and much of the Scripture, I see. When times are bleak, praise of God is a necessity. Doing so reminds us of the greatness of the one to whom we ask for help. Praise is the appropriate entry point to anything dealing with our God because our God is great and worthy to be praised.

God, in this instance from First Peter, is praised for being the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter then begins a lengthy sentence that I'm sure an English teacher might suggest being broken up into smaller, shorter sentences. But it all holds together if we'll just read it closely.

According to his Great mercy. There's an attribute of God that we need to consider. God is merciful.

Again, this is Biblically manifest. We can see this nature of God from the earliest pages of Scripture to the very end and throughout all the pages in between. Remember, in the beginning, God created everything we're ever going to encounter. Then, taking some of the earth of the ground, he shapes man and woman together. Breathing his breath into them, he gives them life. But beyond that, he gives them a perfect living space, gives them work to do and joy to have. What do they do in return? They stray. Given but one instruction, with the slightest bit of provocation, they do exactly the ONE thing they were told not to do.

So, what does God do? He acts MERCIFULLY. But, beyond that, the people of God continue to stray. I'm sure it has got to be quite tedious to God our failures that is and yet God is quick to be merciful. **Lamentations 3:22-23** – "*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*" **Ephesians 2:4-5** – "*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—*" **Hebrews 4:16** – "*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*" When we worship God, we worship a God of mercy. It all makes sense, really as we recollect that Jesus Christ came to spare us punishment for our sins. According to First Thessalonians, "*He bore our sins on His body on the Cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.*"

If you find yourself mired in sin right now, I want you just to remember God loves you and has already forgiven you for your misdeeds. We worship a God not of punishment and revenge but rather of mercy and forgiveness. Never lose sight of that. People want to sometimes. They want to rain down fire and brimstone on those they've determined are God's enemies. But God says relax, that vengeance is His, not ours. And more importantly, we've got to remember that ours in a God of love and, thus, as a function of that loving nature, is indeed truly and eternally merciful to us, sinners.

And it's also a function of that mercy that "he has caused us to be born again." Did you ever think of that? That it is because God is merciful, we aren't left to die in our sins. That, in fact, what God has for us is something more wonderful than just pardon. What Jesus has in store for us is nothing less than an entirely new life. One that is connected to his life intimately through the Holy Spirit's indwelling in our hearts.

Being born again is always a difficult word to preach to Presbyterian congregations. We, after all, are known as the "frozen chosen" and all that talk of new life sounds dangerous to our well-refined, cultured ears. But the fact of the matter is that the Scriptures are full of talk on new life, new birth, born again. Jesus even tells us as much in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. Talking with Nicodemus in John chapter 3, Jesus says, "<sup>3</sup> *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*<sup>4</sup> *Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*<sup>5</sup> *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."*

I am fortunate to have seen new birth in my life. One of the reasons I talk about the prison ministry I'm involved with is because of new life. Prior to participating in Kairos, I didn't really understand the whole nature of new birth. I was a Presbyterian pastor, nobody much in our denomination talks about it even though it's Biblically truthful, maybe that should give us pause about our denomination to begin with, laughing out loud. But the guys at Kairos talked about it a lot. Then, on my very first walk, I was able to see new life happen. One was a guy in one of my groups named Ryan. Ryan was serving time for a series of robberies he'd committed while high on methamphetamines. A good young man, he'd been hardened by doing 5 years in the state penitentiary. During a particularly emotional time of the event, Ryan came up to me and said he wanted prayer. He said something was happening and He knew the Lord was doing something. So, we went into a large supply closet which we convert into a chapel to pray. We prayed and Ryan, by all his accounts, arose a different man. Here was a guy hardened by time in prison, beaten by drugs and alcohol. Ryan's out now, a family man, working construction and attending a Baptist Church in Lancaster South Carolina.

But that being born again, it's being born into something according to First Peter. It's being born again into a living HOPE. What does hope mean to you?

For some, we might say that we "HOPE" the Braves will win another pennant this year but, looking at the standings today, that doesn't seem all that likely, does it? Hope can sometimes just stand as a synonym for "Wish". I hope that the Braves win the Series again is just my wishful thinking. I wish the Braves would win the pennant means just about the same thing, doesn't it?

But to have hope in the Lord Jesus Christ is a different thing. IT's tethered or, as to use Paul's terms, it's a living hope. Why is it a "living hope," we might wonder? Because our HOPE is in Jesus Christ who is ALIVE even though he died. To have a living hope is to be able to function in a world that seemingly has gone berserk. A living hope reminds us that even though the world is in flux, there is something that protects us, keeps us safe. Did you notice that part in the passage, that we are being kept safe for an inheritance? That means that, while we're here on earth, we are being protected by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.