

Barre Congregational Church Outdoor Service

October 18, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser
~ Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost~
“Let us hold on to our Living Hope”

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 1 v 3-9 and Hebrews 11v 1-11

I. Introduction:

Last week I shared with you my experiences with the workmen who fixed our electricity, after the power outage we had. It was a complex job because of the downed tree. I also told you how the manager shared his conviction that things would be fixed. They knew, even though they did not see the result at the beginning, that we would have our electricity back. I was in awe of the whole process, and started wondering why one would then need faith and prayer and this thing called hope, if the world had become so incredibly technologically advanced, and always finds the answers to the problems we face. I thought that perhaps for many, faith and spirituality and the thing called hope might just not sound that attractive in a world like ours. So, I was intrigued by this passage in 1 Peter as he was reminding the Early Christians about their Living Hope during a time like theirs...

II. The building blocks of prayer, faith and hope

During this month of Stewardship, we are focusing on four areas in our Christian life, which reminds us of what it means to be good stewards of the gift of God in Christ in our lives. These areas are prayer, faith, hope and peace, four major building blocks to hold onto as we live our lives. These are the same building blocks and Christian values which the apostles reminded the early Christians to hold onto as young congregations while they were facing their own struggles during that time. We have spent the last two Sundays focusing on the importance of prayer, and to live our lives by faith. This morning we will be talking about the Living Hope within us.

In our passage, Peter writes to Jewish Christians who were scattered around in Asia Minor. These Christians are foreigners in a hostile environment, where they experienced localized persecution by those who resisted their Christian faith. He encourages them to be no cause for offense, but to live a self-controlled life upholding the values of love and respect for one another. As with the Philippians last week, they must remain steadfast in the face of personal attacks.

III. Christ, our Living Hope:

After greeting them, Peter breaks into this powerful proclamation that God has given them/us, a new birth into a Living Hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for us. Despite their trials and tribulations, they have this promise of a living hope now, in this life, as well as into eternity.

They through their faith, will be shielded by God’s power until the end of time. What a powerful promise for them to hear, and to hold onto. The Greek term for hope means to have an eager, confident expectation, so, unlike the despair they experienced in their lives, they have within them this Living Hope in Christ.

In addition, these Christians need to remember that they have a new identity in Christ. Karen H. Jobes, in her book on 1 Peter, describes it like this, “They need to know who they are before God, so that they can be who they are in society. Their thinking needs to be transformed ... during troubling times.” They need to know their help comes from God, Who lives inside of them, and that could not be taken away from them.

I am reminded of my time in seminary during the height of apartheid, when we as students were wondering where God was when we were suffering so much? (This same question had been asked in other contexts as well, of course). As we asked that question, and as young people of faith, we learned and discovered that our Living God was indeed dwelling with us, lived inside of us as we were learning how to be pastors and preachers. We learned that God was in our situation of struggle and pain in the same way as God dwelled with the Israelites on their journey. We learned that those who persecuted us could not harm the Living Hope inside of us, that Hope Who was/is Christ and the hope we had for a different dispensation. I came to learn how God is with us all the time through my experiences in South Africa, and how God shows up and changes circumstances, changed our country and ushered us into a new dispensation. I saw something I never thought I would see. I saw and felt the freedom inside of me, given to me by our God who gave us our freedom, the freedom to experience my full humanity, which no one could take away again. That is the freedom and hope we have, that Peter is encouraging the Jewish Christians in the diaspora, who are being persecuted for their faith.

IV. Conclusion:

Today, where we are, we may not experience the same persecution the early Christians experienced, but there are places in the world where religious and ethnic conflicts are very real, and it is difficult to imagine how one would live out one's faith in the face of such resistance and danger. We do see in the US and other parts of the world different perspectives and differences in dogma and beliefs among different Christian groups as it pertains to specific issues, which can lead to conflicts and divisions. In my work in conflict transformation I have seen how churches have struggled to keep it together when there were differences in belief, values, money, structures, and communication issues. It has always been my intention to help churches in conflict to remember that they are more than just a church, that they are a community of faith with Christ living and dwelling among them. The church is more than just a building, a group of people coming together to plan and do things together. It is the place where God is, lives, and where we come before God, where we ask for forgiveness for our sins, and where we serve God and our neighbor in love and mutual respect, where we are filled with the Holy Spirit to be in relationship with God and where our spirit and mind and hearts get renewed every time. It is a place where we together ask for God's help and guidance during good and bad times.

Peter reminds the Christians in the diaspora of who they are, and that they have a Living Hope through Jesus Christ to help them as they face their adversaries and those who made it hard for them to live out their Christian beliefs. Whether it be the early Christians, or us now, we always have that Hope within us. That is the grace and mercy we do not easily find in many other spaces we live and work in. Our strengths and also our weaknesses and vulnerabilities are known to God, and because of that grace and mercy, we have this Living Hope of Jesus Christ with us, living inside us and inside this body which we call Barre Congregational Church. We must remember that we have all the help we need to remain close together through thick and thin, no matter what we are facing. Yes, we are living during a difficult period of time now, where it is possible to fall into despair, where we may not have all the answers like we used to have, but we also know we can bring all that concerns us, to God in prayer, and we have a faith we can tap into, and we have a Hope living inside of us to hold onto, to guide us and help us in all we need. May God bless us as we reflect on these thoughts coming to us via Peter. Amen.