

A Living Hope

1 Peter 1:3-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We are officially on a one-week hiatus from recording worship services, so there's no music or stories or bulletin.

But I thought I would try something brand new today and offer a video mini sermon/meditation to supplement other online worship options that you might be taking advantage of.

I thank you in advance for your patience. And who knows, if it works ok, I may try it again in the future as we sort out which online rhythms are sustainable for our church going forward.

I hope you are doing well. I have managed to connect with almost all of you by phone or email or social media over the past few weeks, and I am glad to hear that people are finding their way amidst all the uncertainty and continuing to find creative ways to love each other well.

I have been heartened to see that this pandemic has made us more intentional about connect with one another whether this is online, over the phone or other creative ways.

I've been encouraged to hear of flowers being delivered to some of our older members, of treats being delivered to young families, of impromptu birthday celebrations outside people's windows.

We are continuing to be the church even while physically separate. We have been reminded that the church is not a building but a people.

Having said that, I know that these days are not easy. Most of us are itching to get back to regular rhythms and routines. Some are feeling weary of the boredom, the loneliness, the uncertainty.

Some feel financial pressures mounting. Some have big questions about how this pandemic will affect our collective future. Will these days of isolation turn us into suspicious people who are afraid to be together?

Will we come out of this time, whenever it ends, fearful, paranoid, and over-protective? What will become of the shared public spaces that used to bring joy and meaning and connection into our lives?

It seems like there are many more questions than answers these days. And after a while, this whole package has a kind of wearying quality to it.

Last week was Easter Sunday and we have entered the fifty-day Easter season.

It feels weird to even say “Easter season” because if we are Christians, all of life is the “Easter season.” All of life is meant to be a celebration of the risen Christ, not just the fifty days between Easter Sunday and Pentecost.

But of all the seasons in the Christian calendar, this is the season of joy!

Is genuine joy possible in a pandemic?

I suspect many of us would say, “Well, I know the right answer is ‘yes,’ but...”

I get the “Yes, but...” response. Yes, we know that there are small pleasures to be found in slowing down, in reconnecting with people in slower ways, in not feeling pressure to be here, there and everywhere. We’re glad for these small blessings of our moment.

But *joy*? Are we even *allowed* to be full of joy in the midst of all the bad news?

Aren’t we supposed to be grimly monitoring the tv and our computer screens, reminding everyone of their duty to stay home and not do anything that might be too risky?

It probably won’t surprise you to hear me say that I absolutely do think that joy is possible in a pandemic.

I believe that joy is possible at all times and in all places, no matter what we are going through because of who God is and because of what God, in Christ, has done.

I also believe this because of the witness of the joyful witness and testimony of the early church, often in circumstances much more difficult than our own.

One of the assigned scripture readings for this week is from a letter written by Peter to various churches in Asia minor near the end of the first century (approximately fifty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection).

Peter writes this letter to churches undergoing social discrimination and outright persecution. He is writing to people whose lives were not easy. They didn't even have Netflix and Skip the Dishes!

I read the opening words of Peter's letter this week (1 Peter 1:3-9) and found it to be an enormously comforting and challenging word to us in our time and place. Indeed, the more I read them, the more it seemed to me that you could hardly imagine more timely words.

We obviously don't have a formal "scripture reading" so I'm just going to walk through this passage and offer a few comments along the way.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us 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. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Peter begins his letter where he should, where we *all* should. With God.

He reminds the church that they are the recipients of God's great mercy. He points them to the "living hope" that was birthed through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

For Peter and the early church, absolutely *everything* depends on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is our guarantee, our promise, our future.

This is what enables Christians to look to what lies ahead with sure hope and unconquerable joy.

An inheritance waits for us that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Three centuries or so later, John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, put it like this in an Easter Sunday sermon:

Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!
First and last alike receive your reward;
rich and poor, rejoice together!

Let no one go away hungry. Partake, all, of the cup of faith.
Enjoy all the riches of His goodness!

Let no one grieve at his poverty,
for the universal kingdom has been revealed.
Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again;
for forgiveness has risen from the grave.

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.

He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh...

Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?
Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Our living hope is that death has been defeated, that all has been forgiven, and that we do not have to be afraid.

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater

worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:3-6-7).

Earlier this week, I was reading Tom Holland's book *Dominion* which is this massive history of the Western mind (because what better thing to read during these days where it's difficult to focus!). He was talking about the story of Job and he had this simple line that stopped me in my tracks.

Satan responds mockingly that it is easy for the prosperous to be good.

I suppose we always interpret things through the lens of our own context, but my first thought was, "I wonder if this pandemic is giving us all a chance to see if we really mean what we say, if our faith really is what we say it is."

It's easy to have faith when things are comfortable, right? When our health is good and our bank account is relatively stable, when we have the comfort and connection of family and friends?

What about when these things are taken away? Do we actually believe that God is with us in the midst of difficult times? That our faith in Christ is an anchor in the storm? Or are these just things we say when times are easy?

Peter tells the early church that the suffering and grief that they are enduring has a purpose. Their faith can be refined in the midst of their trials. And their faith is more valuable even than gold!

A church that clings to joy, to faith, hope, and love even in the midst of suffering will bring praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed in the end.

I wonder, will this time of pandemic be a time when our faith is grown? Where our hope is strengthened? Where we see what our priorities in life really should be? Where we ask hard questions about what the meaning of all this is—questions that are easier to ignore when things are going well and we are comfortable and untroubled?

I pray that this may be the case.

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:8-9).

This is my favourite part of this passage.

Though you have not seen him, you love him... you believe in him... and you are filled with a joy that is difficult to even articulate.

Because Jesus, in dying for us and being vindicated by an empty tomb, has saved our souls.

And we should remember that the “soul” is not some immaterial part of us that floats off to heaven when we die; rather, the word “soul” speaks to the totality of who we are, the deepest part of us—mind, body, spirit.

This is the end goal of our faith. To be rescued by the mercy of God and liberated from bondage to death.

To be loved into new life, both here and now and in the life to come.

Through Easter, God has indeed given us new birth into a living hope. This is as true when the sun is shining, and all seems well with the world as it is when we’re lurching through a global pandemic and there are dark clouds on the horizon.

Let’s close with a word of prayer:

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the living hope that exploded out of that first Easter.

I pray that you would sink our roots deep into this hope.

I pray that even though we don’t see you, our love for you would be ever growing.

That even though your way sometimes seems hidden from our eyes, even though we go through trials of various kinds, that our faith would be strengthened.

That even when things around us seem chaotic and uncertain, we would be filled with inexpressible joy.

Be near to the lonely

Bring solace to the restless

Healing and courage to those whose health is failing

Comfort to those who are grieving
Companionship to the lonely
And peace to minds that are troubled.
Strengthen us as a community even during these days while we are apart.

We pray all these things in the strong name of Jesus Christ and for his sake.

Amen.

