

“Where Is God When Things Feel Hopeless?”

Date: 15 April 2018

Text: 1 Peter 1: 3 - 9

Rev. Peter Coutts

Easter is a celebration of the love of God for us. As we read in John’s Gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”. But Easter holds an additional, fundamental consequence for us as people of faith. Peter opened his first letter this way. “God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”. God has given us hope: hope that God is there and that God cares and that we are now God’s. Now hope is something we all know about...and need. We can appreciate our nature as hopeful creatures most clearly in the time of crisis. In 2010 33 miners were trapped 700 meters underground in Chile. Rescuers worked tirelessly for 69 days to free them because they had hope. All 33 miners were saved. Hope is what keeps us going when the odds are stacked against us. But hope is also woven through simple things in life. We take medication in the hope that our health may improve. We might leave for work half an hour early on a snowy morning, hoping to beat the traffic. Hope that it won’t rain on Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. When things are certain, we expect. But when things are uncertain, we hope. Hope provides a positive outlook when the future is uncertain, and then hope keeps us going. It sustains us when we are anxious, struggling, suffering, longing and unfulfilled. Humans are hard-wired for hope. Without it, we die inside.

Peter in this letter says that hope is one of the greatest gifts of the resurrection. And in these 7 verses he makes four points about this resurrection hope. The first is that the resurrection births in us a brand new life which is a life of hope. So often in our life experience our hopes are about discrete things: this and that. That we will pass the exam, or get that raise. But here Peter is talking about something fundamentally different. He says the resurrection makes possible a “living hope”: a hope that can fuel our living, sustain our soul. What does that look like? Imagine going to a play at the theatre. Our lives are like the play, and they can be filled with ups and downs, dramas and crises, plot twists, comedy and tragedy. But the play unfolds on a stage. No matter how the story unfolds the stage remains fixed and certain and unchanged, holding up the drama being played upon it. That is what this living hope is to be for us. The stage is that hope that God is there, and cares, and we are God’s, assured by the resurrection.. This is to be that solid foundation that supports us as our lives play out. It is to be the one hope we can cling to and count on, even if some of our other hopes in life do not come to be as hoped. Paul put it this way in Romans 8. “If God is for us, then what can stand against us? If God could give his own Son up to death for our sakes, will not God give of himself in other ways for our sakes as well?... What can separate us from this love of God: trials, distress, persecution, famine, death? No we are more than conquerors through him who loved us... nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What Peter and Paul are saying is that even when the hopes of our lives are challenged – and we grow anxious, worried, despondent – the hope we have in the risen Christ is one that we can count on, to assure us that God is there, and cares, and that we are God’s. To shift

the analogy, our hope in Christ is to be like the rope that tethers a boat to a dock. No matter how the boat may drift around, or be buffeted by waves, still it is held fast. Hope can be like this.

But the thing is we can take a lot of buffeting in life. And that can not only be a challenge to our life, and cause hopes to fade, but it can even push us to the point where we question this foundational hope we have in God's love. Peter acknowledged this reality here quite succinctly. He wrote, "In this (living hope) you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials...". The reality is that the trials of life can call our hopes in God into question. Archbishop Desmond Tutu recalled the reality of this through decades of hurting and hoping in South Africa. He wrote, "We might have been forgiven for wondering whether God was around, whether God saw, whether God heard, whether God was even aware of the suffering, the injustice, and the oppression. People detained, jailed, tortured. People exiled, people killed. All of this, it seemed, did not touch God". Any of us can feel the same in the experience of: feeling that God is absent, unanswered prayer, in the face of grave illness, family crises, any number of things. In times like this it can seem like we are holding onto our faith by our fingernails.

We help ourselves best in these moments by observing and reflecting on our hopes. If we do that, we can actually find ourselves drawing more strength from God through our hopes. For example, by observing our hopes we can see whether we are directing our hopes the right way. Philip Yancey has observed in his book on prayer that in North America people facing difficult times commonly pray "Lord, take this from me", while in Africa people commonly pray "Lord, provide me with the strength to see this through". Those two different prayers are expressing very different hopes, aren't they? If in the tough time we only pray "Lord, take this from me", and if the tough time continues, what might happen? That foundational hope that God loves us can be eroded, crumble, and disappear. This happens far too commonly. But if we observe our hope in the midst of crisis, seeing it unfulfilled and growing shakey, that can be a point for us to ask ourselves "am I hoping for the wrong thing from God here?" In the face of unfulfilled hope we can often find more strength in God by pointing our hopes in a different way. In fact, we can find ourselves sustained in our hope so much better if we shift our focus from "what do I want to hope for in this situation" to ask "what might God hope for me in this situation?" So we can hope in the wrong direction. We can also hope in too much of a hurry. In our time of need, we want God to jump now to our schedule. But it is not always so... in fact in my experience rarely so. And this too works against us, because impatience with God can also cause that foundational hope that God loves us to be eroded, crumble, and disappear. The Old Testament prophets were always speaking into crises in the lives of the people of God. 43 times in the books of the prophets we hear them say "wait for the Lord"... wait for the Lord in the midst of your crisis. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote this became the final harbour for their hope, the need to simply wait upon the Lord. And he wrote that in their time of waiting that God blew a new wind through the world that led to change in South Africa.

Peter in this letter acknowledged that it is not always easy to maintain that fundamental hope that God loves us. He wrote, "In this (living hope) you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials...". My two points so far is that in the midst of trials, when our hope feels challenged, that we should (first) step back and observe our hopes: to see if we are hoping in the right things. Second, an encouragement to be patient in our hopes as we "wait upon the Lord". What I'm suggesting in this spiritual practice is that we can be changed, positively, in the midst of the trials of life, by reflecting on the nature of our fundamental hopes in God. And that can deepen our Christian character, that can strengthen our faith, for the facing of the hour. This is actually Peter's third point in this passage. Everyone faces difficulties in life. The analogy Peter uses here is that these difficulties can be like fires. And two things can happen in a fire. The fire can consume. It can burn up our fundamental hope that God loves us: that God is there, and cares, and we are God's. But in this letter Peter also says that the challenges of life can be like a refining fire, purifying hope, strengthening hope. He wrote, "the genuineness of your faith, which is more precious than gold, can be tested by fire, and can result in more praise and glory and honour". If we observe our hopes in the difficult challenges of life – seeing if we are hoping in the right things, seeing if we are patient in hoping – the challenge can be a time that deepens faith rather than diminishes it. Paul put it this way in Romans, "we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance (I've been saying patience in waiting upon the Lord), and endurance produces character (I've been talking about a changing, deepening faith, which is kind of the same here), and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts... Remember, God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5.1-8).

This last idea is the final point that Peter made in this passage. The tough things of life can strain our hope that God loves us. For hope to exist we have to trust that the one we are hoping in can do what we hope and cares enough to fulfill our hope. Peter here reminds us that indeed we can trust God for this. He wrote, "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you, you who are protected by the power of God...". Peter is saying: have confidence in that foundational hope that God loves you, is there there for you, cares for you and that you are God's. What God has given us in grace is maintained in grace: imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept, protected. How can we trust that? Paul says here, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Easter brought hope.

So in this passage Peter says: 1] trust God in a foundational hope that God loves us, 2] appreciate that it is a reality that the difficulties of life can challenge hope, 3] take those challenges as opportunities to partner with God to observe and deepen our hopes,

refining them, 4] hold onto the fact that Christ's death and resurrection can give us confidence in our hope. Finally [5] "wait upon the Lord". Be patient for hope's fulfillment.

As the human creature, we seem to be hardwired for hope. As we face the huge and the tiny uncertainties of life we need hope. So one of our prayers can always be that our hope in God increase. The theologian Lewis Smedes put it this way: that faith as hope is always a readiness for God. A readiness for God in any situation in life. Smedes says we should be like fledgling birds that greet the arrival of their parents with open, expectant mouths, anxious to be fed. If we live like this, we will receive faith, we will gain greater trust, and that will produce stronger hope. "And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts".