I Peter 3:13-17
May 21, ‘17

“THE HOPE WITHIN”

THIS PASSAGE FROM FIRST PETER IS NOT THE ENTIRE LECTIONARY EPISTLE READING FOR TODAY. THE WHOLE THING IS TWICE AS LONG, GOING THROUGH VERSE 22.

I HAD A HARD ENOUGH TIME, THOUGH, INCLUDING AS MUCH AS WE DID WITHOUT BEING OVERWHELMED BY IT.

PETER MAKES A STATEMENT HERE THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN ONE OF MY FAVORITE VERSES OF SCRIPTURE.

IT’S A SENTENCE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PASSAGE – “ALWAYS BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE TO ANYONE WHO DEMANDS FROM YOU AN
ACCOUNTING FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU, YET DO IT WITH GENTLENESS & REVERENCE.”

THERE ARE TWO VERY IMPORTANT LESSONS AT EITHER END OF THAT SENTENCE WITH SOMETHING PERHAPS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IN THE MIDDLE OF IT.

“ALWAYS BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE…”

PETER IS TELLING US IT’S IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHAT WE BELIEVE & WHY WE BELIEVE IT.

THAT’S NOT EASY, IS IT?

WE READ THE BIBLE.

WE PRAY.

WE COME TO WORSHIP.

WE RECITE THE APOSTLES’ CREED & THE LORD’S PRAYER EVERY WEEK.
BUT HOW MANY OF US CAN COMFORTABLY ANSWER IF ASKED WHAT WE BELIEVE & WHY WE BELIEVE IT?

EVEN IF YOU CAN INTELLECTUALLY OFFER AN ANSWER, HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

HOW DO YOU PUT YOUR FAITH INTO WORDS?

PROBABLY THE FIRST THING TO DO IS FORGET THE INTELLECTUAL ASPECT OF YOUR ANSWER.

THE INTELLECTUAL PART – THE MENTAL PART – THE THEOLOGICAL PART – MAY PROVIDE A FOUNDATION FOR YOUR FAITH, BUT THAT’S NOT THE SUBSTANCE OF IT.

THE HEART OF YOUR FAITH LIES IN YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE – IT’S IN THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE.
“THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO ME TO HAVE JESUS CHRIST AT THE CENTER OF MY LIFE.

THIS IS WHAT MY EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN.

THIS IS THE DIFFERENCE A LIFE OF FAITH MAKES FOR ME.”

THAT ISN’T EASY TO DO, THOUGH, IS IT?

IN A WORLD THAT CONTINUES TO BECOME INCREASINGLY SKEPTICAL OF CHRISTIANITY IN PARTICULAR & FAITH IN GENERAL, IT BECOMES MORE & MORE CHALLENGING TO SPEAK TO OTHERS ABOUT WHY YOU CONTINUE TO HOLD ONTO THAT WHICH SO MANY HAVE CHOSEN TO REJECT & RIDICULE.

BUT PERHAPS THE KEY LIES, NOT IN SPEAKING, BUT RATHER IN LISTENING.
AND THAT LEADS TO THE LESSON THAT’S FOUND AT THE END OF THAT SENTENCE THAT STANDS IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS PASSAGE.

“ALWAYS BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE TO ANYONE WHO DEMANDS FROM YOU AN ACCOUNTING FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU; YET DO IT WITH GENTLENESS AND REVERENCE…”

“DO IT WITH GENTLENESS & REVERENCE.”

LAST WEEK, IN OUR SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS, WE WATCHED AN ANIMATED VIDEO WHERE, AT ONE POINT, A YOUNG WOMAN ASKS A GROUP OF PEOPLE – “ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?”

WHEN THEY RESPOND, “NO,” SHE GETS THIS VERY SAD & JUDGMENTAL LOOK ON HER FACE AND SAYS, “OH, I’M SO SORRY.”
THE MESSAGE SHE’S CONVEYING –
INTENTIONAL OR NOT – IS “SORRY, BUT SINCE
YOU’RE A MISERABLE SINNER, YOU’RE GOING TO
SPEND ETERNITY IN HELL!”

THAT, UNFORTUNATELY, IS HOW MUCH OF THE
WORLD VIEWS THOSE OF US WHO HAVE
COMMITTED OUR LIVES TO FOLLOWING JESUS
CHRIST.

WE COME ACROSS AS ARROGANT &
JUDGMENTAL.

WE’VE GOT ALL THE ANSWERS & OUR ANSWERS
ARE THE RIGHT ONES.

THAT’S WHY IT’S FAR MORE IMPORTANT TO
LISTEN THAN IT IS TO SPEAK IN A CONVERSATION
ABOUT FAITH.
WHEN SOMEONE HAS A QUESTION ABOUT SPIRITUAL MATTERS, IT’S NOT REALLY ABOUT DOCTRINE OR THEOLOGY.

IT’S A QUESTION ABOUT REAL LIFE.

“WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME?”

“How can I find peace in my life?”

“Who can I trust to be there when things go south?”

“When will I not be so afraid of the future?”

“Where can I turn when anger, depression & loneliness take hold of my life?”

The key is simply to listen.

Listen with love & sensitivity & compassion.
LISTEN TO THE CARES & CONCERNS THAT ARE BROUGHT TO YOU.

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, IF YOU ENGAGE IN A 30-MINUTE CONVERSATION WITH SOMEONE WHERE THEIR WORDS OCCUPY 27 OF THOSE 30 MINUTES, AT THE END OF IT, THAT PERSON IS GOING TO SAY, “THANKS! I’VE REALLY ENJOYED OUR TIME TOGETHER!”

CONVERSELY, IF YOUR WORDS OCCUPY 27 OF THOSE 30 MINUTES, THAT OTHER PERSON WILL BE DOING ANYTHING THEY CAN TO GET AWAY FROM YOU!

THAT’S HUMAN NATURE – IN ANY CONVERSATION!

IT’S EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT MATTERS OF FAITH WITH
SOMEONE WHO IS SKEPTICAL ABOUT
CHRISTIANITY.

WITH GENTLENESS & REVERENCE, YOU CAN
SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF FINDING ANSWERS TO
THOSE NAGGING QUESTIONS THAT WE ALL HAVE –
QUESTIONS ABOUT WHY THINGS HAPPEN, WHERE
TO FIND PEACE, WHO TO TURN TO IN TROUBLESOME
TIMES, YOUR FEAR OF THE FUTURE & OVERCOMING
THE ANGER, DEPRESSION & LONELINESS THAT
THREATEN TO OVERWHELM & CONSUME YOU.

THE WORLD DOESN’T NEED MORE CHRISTIAN
LECTURERS.

IT NEEDS MORE CHRISTIAN LISTENERS.

SO WE HAVE THOSE TWO LESSONS AT THE TOP
& BOTTOM OF THIS SINGLE SENTENCE IN THE
MIDDLE OF THIS PASSAGE.
“BE READY TO EXPLAIN YOUR FAITH & DO SO WITH GENTLENESS & REVERENCE.”

BUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS SENTENCE IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS PASSAGE, THERE’S SOMETHING ELSE.

NOTICE THAT PETER DOESN’T SAY, “BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE FOR THE FAITH THAT IS IN YOU.”

HE SAYS, “BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU.”

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH THIS IS AN OVERRIDING THEME OF THIS ENTIRE LITTLE LETTER.

THE PEOPLE TO WHOM HE WAS WRITING WERE BEING SLANDERED & THREATENED.

THEIR WITNESS TO CHRIST’S LOVE & THEIR DETERMINATION TO DEDICATE THEMSELVES TO
CHRIST’S SERVICE MADE THEM THE CONSTANT TARGETS OF THOSE WHO SERVED THE ROMAN EMPIRE & HAILED CAESAR AS LORD.

DESPITE THEIR INNOCENCE, THEY LIVED IN FEAR OF THE AUTHORITIES WHO CONTROLLED THEIR WORLD.

PETER BEGINS HIS LETTER BY SAYING,

“BLESSED BE THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, WHO ACCORDING TO HIS GREAT MERCY, HAS BROUGHT ABOUT IN US THAT REBIRTH WHICH LEADS TO A LIVING HOPE…”

EVEN IN THE MIDST OF THE DEEPEST DARKNESS IMAGINABLE, PETER TELLS THEM TO HANG ONTO THEIR HOPE.

IT’S TRUE IN EVERY AGE, ISN’T IT, OUR OWN INCLUDED.
SOMEONE WRITING ON THIS PASSAGE OPENED THEIR REMARKS BY SAYING, “MANY HAVE DESCRIBED OUR AGE AS AN AGE OF MALAISE, OF QUIET DESPERATION, OF FEAR AND ANXIETY.

LISTENING TO THE NEWS EACH EVENING, OR READING OUR PAPERS EACH MORNING, WE CAN READILY UNDERSTAND WHY SOME WOULD RESPOND WITH PESSIMISM AND CYNICISM, IF NOT DESPAIR.

I FIND IT COMMON TODAY TO HEAR PEOPLE SAY, ‘I JUST CAN’T LOOK AT THE NEWS ANYMORE. I GET SO DEPRESSED. IT’S JUST TOO OVERWHELMING.’”

THOSE ARE THE WORDS OF SOMEONE WRITING ON THIS PASSAGE 15 YEARS AGO.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN 15 MINUTES AGO.

BUT IT ALSO COULD HAVE BEEN 150 YEARS AGO OR 1500 YEARS AGO.
THESE WORDS OF HOPE ARE FOR EVERY AGE.
WE’RE NOT TALKING ABOUT PIE-IN-THE-SKY, BLINDLESS OPTIMISM THAT DOESN’T FACE UP TO THE REAL PROBLEMS IN OUR WORLD.
WE’RE TALKING ABOUT HOPE THAT SEES WITH THEY EYES OF FAITH & LOVE.
JURGEN MOLTMAANN – ONE OF THE GREATEST PROONENTS OF HOPE AS AN ESSENTIAL OF OUR FAITH – SAID THAT WE COME TO KNOW THE TRUTH OF HOPE “...IF WE ARE FORCED TO STAND OUR GROUND AGAINST DESPAIR. WE COME TO KNOW ITS POWER WHEN WE REALIZE THAT IT KEEPS US ALIVE IN THE MIDST OF DEATH.”
HOPE LOOKS BEYOND THE PRESENT DARKNESS INTO SOMETHING THAT LIES IN THE FUTURE – HOWEVER DISTANT THAT FUTURE MAY BE.
A DAD ARRIVED LATE FOR HIS YOUNG SON’S BASEBALL GAME & HE WALKED OVER TO THE BENCH TO LET HIM KNOW HE WAS THERE.

HE ASKED WHAT THE SCORE WAS & HIS SON SAID, “18-0 – WE’RE BEHIND.”

HIS DAD SAID, “OH, I’M SORRY. I GUESS YOU’RE PRETTY DISCOURAGED ABOUT THAT.”

BUT HIS SON SAID, “OH, NO. WE HAVEN’T EVEN GOTTEN UP TO BAT YET!”

IN THE PRESENT DARKNESS, WE DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS & HOPE ENABLES US TO LOOK FOR SOMETHING BRIGHTER TO COME.

THERE’S A STORY OF A MAN NAMED GEORGE WHO EXPERIENCED ONE TRAGEDY AFTER ANOTHER EARLY IN HIS LIFE.
WHEN HE WAS JUST 6 SIX YEARS OLD, HE HAD TWO BROTHERS WHO DIED AND THEN HIS MOTHER DIED WHEN HE WAS JUST NINE.

HE SUFFERED FROM DEPRESSION FOR YEARS, UNDOUBTEDLY RELATED TO THOSE EARLY EXPERIENCES OF MISFORTUNE.

AS AN ADULT, THERE WAS YET ANOTHER TRAGEDY THAT NEARLY SENT HIM OVER THE EDGE. HIS YOUNG GRANDDAUGHTER DIED & GEORGE FELL AGAIN INTO DESPAIR.

HE WROTE TO A FRIEND, SAYING, “I SEE NOTHING BUT UNCERTAINTY, CONTENTION, CONFLICT, BELIEFS UNSETTLED AND NOTHING ESTABLISHED IN PLACE OF THEM.”

GEORGE WAS A PAINTER & HIS FATHER HAD BEEN A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT MANUFACTURER.
SHORTLY AFTER THE TRAGIC DEATH OF HIS GRANDDAUGHTER, GEORGE WROTE TO A FRIEND, TELLING HER OF A PAINTING HE WAS CONSIDERING.

HE SAID, “HOPE SITTING ON A GLOBE, WITH BANDAGED EYES, PLAYING A LYRE WHICH HAS ALL THE STRINGS BROKEN BUT ONE, OUT OF WHICH SHE IS TRYING TO GET ALL THE MUSIC POSSIBLE, LISTENING WITH ALL HER MIGHT TO THE LITTLE SOUND – DO YOU LIKE THE IDEA?”

YOU HAVE MORE THAN LIKELY SEEN THAT PAINTING.

THE PAINTING ITSELF IS QUITE EXTRAORDINARY, BUT IT’S THE TITLE THAT GIVES IT MEANING.
IT WOULD SEEM, AS SOME HAVE SUGGESTED, THAT IT SHOULD MOST ACCURATELY HAVE BEEN TITLED “DESPAIR.”

BUT GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS – IN THE MIDST OF HIS OWN DESPAIR – DARED TO LOOK BEYOND IT TO SOMETHING BRIGHTER.

HE TITLED THAT PAINTING “HOPE.”

HE LOOKED BEYOND THE PRESENT DARKNESS INTO THE FUTURE.

HE DIDN’T KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE WOULD HOLD, BUT HE KNEW WHO HELD THAT FUTURE.

THERE ARE STORIES GALORE OF WHAT THAT PAINTING HAS MEANT TO PEOPLE IN THE 130 YEARS SINCE WATTS COMPLETED IT.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, HENRY SHREWSBURY WROTE OF – AS HE SAYS – “A POOR GIRL,
CHARACTER-BROKEN AND HEART-BROKEN,
WANDERING ABOUT THE STREETS OF LONDON WITH A
GROWING FEELING THAT NOTHING REMAINED BUT
TO DESTROY HERSELF.”

ACCORDING TO SHREWSBURY, SHE SAW A
SMALL PRINT OF “HOPE” IN A SHOP AND USED THE
LAST OF HER MONEY TO BUY IT.

HE SAYS, “LOOKING AT IT EVERY DAY, THE
MESSSAGE SANK INTO HER SOUL, AND SHE FOUGHT
HER WAY BACK TO A LIFE OF PURITY & HONOR.”

YOU, TOO, MAY FIND THAT YOU CAN RELATE TO
THAT PAINTING.

YOU MAY FEEL AS THOUGH YOU HAVE ONLY
ONE STRING LEFT ON WHICH TO PLAY THE MUSIC
OF YOUR LIFE.
YOU MAY FEEL THAT ALL THE OTHER STRINGS HAVE BROKEN.

YOU STILL HAVE MUSIC TO PLAY & YOU STILL HAVE A SONG TO SING.

HOPE CAN DO THAT FOR US.

HOPE CAN ENABLE US TO LOOK BEYOND THE PRESENT DARKNESS TO THE FUTURE THAT STANDS BEFORE US.

ALL THE STRINGS OF YOUR LIFE BUT ONE MAY BE BROKEN.

YOUR LIFE IS FRAGILE & THINGS YOU ONCE WERE ABLE TO DO ARE NOW IN THE DISTANT PAST.

BUT IT’S WITH THAT REMAINING STRING THAT YOU CAST YOUR LOT.
THAT ONE, SINGLE REMAINING STRING
ENABLES YOU TO LIVE IN THE HOPE OF A BETTER
TOMORROW.

NO, WE DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE
HOLDS.

NONE OF US DO.

AND YET WE CONTINUE TO LIVE WITH HOPE
BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH WE DON’T KNOW WHAT
THE FUTURE HOLDS, OUR FAITH ASSURES US THAT
WE DO KNOW WHO HOLDS IT. AMEN.

The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana