

Hoping our way to holiness

1 Peter 1:1-9; 13-16

How many of you are filled with hope today? How many of you are feeling holy? Most of us likely feel more comfortable talking about living *hope-filled* lives than about *holy* lives. We tend to think of hope in generally positive terms, although we may get turned off by someone who seems to have an optimistic, Pollyanna type of hope no matter what the circumstance.

But being holy is more of a mixed bag. We've all heard the accusation of someone being "holier than thou" and we want to avoid that label, which one dictionary defines as "having or showing the annoying attitude of people who believe that they are morally better than other people." The thought of being holy can conjure images of false piety or enforced behavioral expectations that feel either unauthentic or judgmental. On the other hand, many of us feel like we can never be good enough to consider ourselves holy.

Our reading from the first chapter of First Peter links these two concepts—hope and holiness—In ways that don't carry the baggage of Pollyanna optimism *or* judgmentalism *or* the impossible. So maybe we should take a closer look.

But before we do, I'd like to give some background to the first letter of Peter since this will be the focus of our worship during the coming Sundays until Pentecost. The first and second letters of Peter are fairly brief; together they comprise fewer than 10 pages in most Bibles, tucked between the books of James and the letters of John.

First Peter is classified as a "general" or "catholic" epistle, one written to Christians in general or to a number of churches in a geographical area, not to a specific church or person, as was the case with most of the letters of the Apostle Paul. First Peter begins with a greeting to "exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." This letter must have traveled a bit!

Biblical scholars understand "exiles of the Dispersion" to refer primarily to new, Gentile Christian communities that have become exiles in their home setting. They have joined the movement of Jesus followers, making them part of a new reality that is both personal and social, and setting them apart from the larger society in which they live.

Although the letter begins by identifying the writer as the apostle Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, biblical scholars are not sure that Peter himself penned the letter. The main reason is that the quality of the original Greek is some of the best, if not *the finest*, of all of the New Testament letters. Peter, the fisherman, probably wouldn't have written in such stylized Greek; scholars disagree about whether Jesus and his disciples even spoke Greek. The letter also contains parts that reflect the theology of the apostle Paul. So it may have been written by someone who worked closely with Peter, but who also was familiar with the teachings of Paul. It was common at the time for people to write in the name of a respected teacher. This wouldn't be considered dishonest or plagiarism in the way we understand those today. Nor does it take away from the authority of the book, representing the teaching of the apostles in the first century.

So now, back to hope and holiness, both of which appear in the first chapter. Hope shows up already in verse three, which is the beginning of a long sentence that spans three verses. "By God's great mercy we have been given a new birth into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in the realm of God for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." That's a lot to unpack and we won't do so entirely this morning.

Hope, here, is grounded in a number of things:

- God's mercy (boundless love)
- new birth (a new beginning)
- Jesus' resurrection (life trumping death)
- inheritance (something we receive as pure gift usually because of a relationship)
- faith (deep, abiding trust), and
- salvation (liberation, finding peace and freedom from fear, from sin, from a troubled past).

Because hope is grounded in all of these, the followers of Jesus, including us, are able to be joyful, to celebrate and give thanks even if we face conflict, challenge or suffering, which seems to have been the case for the recipients of this letter.

I witnessed an example of this hope in the midst of suffering when I was in Ecuador in January. Our group heard various stories of Colombian refugees who had fled to Ecuador because of violence in their country. One family, who had lived a comfortable life in Colombia, fled with only the things they could pack in a couple suitcases after they received credible death threats. The family included two teenage girls who had enjoyed their own bedrooms, TVs, music, phones, clothes and friends—not so different from teen-age life here in the US. Overnight they became a family without income, huddled in a single room, with the daunting task of seeking refugee status and remaking their lives in a country where there is significant discrimination against immigrants.

They were fortunate to find a more adequate place to live but when the father began to seek day labor, he had the experience on more than one occasion of not being paid for his work. Through an employment program of the Mennonite church, the mother decided that she would use her background in business and her ability to cook to start a small business selling food. Her Colombian cornmeal and cheese patties, *arepas*, became popular and she realized she could sell more if she had a food cart and wasn't limited to selling from her home. One of the daughters somehow earned or won \$200, which she would have loved to spend on herself. But she used it to buy a food cart for her mother, believing that investing in her mother's business, would result in a long-term benefit for the whole family. This was an action of love, of trust, and of living hope.

This story is not only about hope but also holiness. In speaking of holiness, the writer of First Peter says: “prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring...and do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.” As the Colombian refugee mother told us her story, she said the most important thing she has learned is that anything material that we have can disappear overnight. And in sharing the story about her daughter's decision, we noted how her daughter's desire for things for herself was transformed into a desire for the good of the whole family.

These are the kinds of holy actions that I imagine the writer of Peter had in mind. When the writer encouraged Christians to “Be holy as God is holy,” he was quoting familiar words from Leviticus, but likely also recalling the paraphrase of these words that Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount: “Be *perfect* therefore as your Heavenly Father is *perfect*.” In the book *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, author Glen Stassen, translates “perfect” (or “holy”) as “consistent.” Being holy is not being perfect or perfectly pure, in the sense of never doing anything wrong. Rather it is a commitment to live as consistently as one can, following the ways of Jesus and our understanding of what God calls us to. It is being open to the new life that God in Christ desires to create us in.

A story recently circulated on Face Book of a woman who was tailgating a car that came to a stop as it approached a caution light in an intersection. She was planning to accelerate through the light and was furious at the driver in front of her who had stopped. She honked her horn and screamed in frustration. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a police officer. He proceeded to take her to the police station, where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, the arresting officer came to her cell and opened the door. As he told her she was free to collect her personal effects and leave, he apologized: “I'm sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the “What Would Jesus Do” and “Follow Me to Sunday-School” bumper stickers and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, so naturally I assumed you had stolen the car.” Not so consistent.

The Anabaptist Christians of the radical reformation in the 16th century lived a consistency at a high personal cost that is hard for us to fathom today. The book of First Peter and its testimony to hopeful and holy living was quoted often by Anabaptists as a source of hope as they faced persecution. Menno Simons, from whom our denomination is named, wrote of those followers of Christ: “Hatred and vengeance they do not know, for they love those who hate them; they do good to those who despitefully use them and pray for those who persecute them... They feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty. They entertain the needy, release prisoners, visit the sick, comfort the fainthearted, admonish the erring, are ready after their Master's example to give their lives for their brethren... They are the children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and know war no more.”¹

Having a living hope that is based in the resurrection empowers us to live joyful, consistent, and yes, holy lives. As we come to the table of The Lord we are invited to be fed and strengthened in hope for holiness.

¹ Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*. Trans. L. Verduin. Ed. J.C. Wenger. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956 (93-94).