

Sunday January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
Epiphany

**PRAYER:** O God, you promised to protect those who know your name; Lord, we know your name! You promised to answer those who call upon you; Lord, we call upon you! You promised to deliver those who love you; Lord, we love you! Pour out your spirit, that we might know that you are in our midst that you are our God, and shall not be moved!

**STEWARDSHIP:** God is our Merciful Provider and all that we have is a gift of his goodness and whatever we acquire is by his grace. God causes the rain to yield abundant harvests and sends the sun to nourish rich growth. We now offer to God our gifts made by God and dedicate our lives to being his good stewards. May God accept our stewardship and bless our efforts on his behalf. Let us now offer our gifts.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** There are days, maybe today is one such day when words fail us Lord. We know that we should shout praise to you and honour your holy name, but life has made us less than appreciative. Sometimes: sadness, grief, poverty, illness, fear or a whole host of other negative human conditions steal our voice of praise. Instead we find ourselves wishing to voice lament. Like the Psalmist we too want to cry out, “How Long, O Lord.” How long must those of us who are sick suffer? How long must those of us who are lonely face isolation? How long must we be frustrated by those who misunderstand us? O God, we want so much to praise you but we feel defeated. We want to shout Hallelujah, but instead we hear cancer, unemployment, divorce, abuse and violence. Forgive us Lord, the distractions in our time of worship but we find ourselves overwhelmed by life.

Yet, we do experience your presence in these moments together. We yearn for reassurance and love and these we find coming in abundance from your hands. We ache for understanding and we realize that through Jesus you have experienced all we have encountered and then some. Even in our darkest moments, we have been surprised by your grace. Through the kind words, thoughtful deeds and patient attention of friends and even complete strangers you have ministered to us. Thank you for these bright rays of light that shine into the darkness that threatens to consume us. Thank you for the promptings you place in someone else heart to reach out to us and offer hope. Grant us the grace and presence of mind to never take for granted those ways both big and small that people become your hearts and hands in our need. Thank you for your moving in places where we are vulnerable and at the mercy of people and situations we cannot control. From hospital wards to prison wards, from homeless shelters to mission boards you are moving and ministering. O God, when we consider all the ways you are moving in this world, and in our lives, we suddenly find our voice of praise. How marvelous it is to be pulled from our state of being lost. How incredible to be valued so much by you that you seek us out or welcome us home with great joy and anticipation. How welcomed is that cup of cold water or cup of coffee or offer of lunch with a friend when we feel so alone and unnoticed.

How long O Lord? O Lord, you have already answered us. You have already responded; already saved us. If you are for us, who can be against us? There is no level of darkness that can ever separate us from you. No level of sickness. No level of loneliness. No level of poverty. Whether we are on top of the world or in its deepest pit you are here with us.

We are, despite our struggles, more than conquerors through Christ who loves us. Help us dear God to feel like the victors over despair that we are. Help us to claim our heritage as your children. Remind us again of our reality that we are a community. That when one of us suffers, we all suffer. When one of us rejoices, we all rejoice. That my brother’s pain is my pain. That my sister’s award is my award. We truly are in this adventure called life, together.

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In the name of Christ, we offer our prayers, our praise, and our hearts and pray together as our Saviour taught us.

**BENEDICTION:** O people of God, aim at righteousness, and shun iniquity; aim at steadfastness, and shun disloyalty; aim at gentleness, and shun cruelty; aim at faithfulness, and shun hypocrisy; but most of all, aim at love, and shun no one. Amen.

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1 Peter 1:1-12

Series: The Christian Life Experience.

“Refining Fire.”

In my consideration of our little series on the two letters of Peter, I have come to see that the two letters can be easily summed up as offering us all a choice. The choice being that as followers of Christ, we can choose to approach life in one of two ways. This choice is made even starker when we are faced with trials and struggles in life. In considering how to unlock this choice for all of us, I remembered a little story I heard some years back.

The story goes that there were two brothers. One brother was an incurable optimist and the other an incorrigible pessimist. No two brothers could be more opposite in their attitude and approach to life. For the optimistic brother, there was nothing that could ever happen that seemed to dampen his positive spirit. And for the other brother, nothing ever seemed to lift his spirit.

One Christmas, the parents of the two boys decided to try and bring some balance to their two boys. They wanted to make their boys better rounded, as we like to say. For the pessimistic boy they bought Christmas gifts that anticipated his every wish, hoping that such an array of good things would produce signs of a more positive disposition. Conversely, and surprisingly, they gave the optimistic boy a bag of horse manure.

On Christmas morning, the pessimistic boy opened a box of magnificent electric trains. In response he said with dismay, “They’ll probably break.” When he opened up the box containing a brand-new stereo he simply groaned, “I don’t have any CDs to play on this thing.” He went on and on like that as he opened one gift after another. There were negative responses to everything.

On the other hand, when the optimistic child opened up his gift and found horse manure in it, he started shouting and jumping up and down for joy. When his parents wanted to know what he was so happy about, he exclaimed, “Do you see what I got? Do you see what I got? There’s got to be a pony around here somewhere!” (Let me tell you a story-Tony Campolo, pg. 201)

The Apostle Peter’s two letters were written to displaced Jewish Christians who in earthly terms, had very little to be optimistic about. Foreigners, persecuted, ridiculed, harassed, pressured on every side, life for these early Christians was becoming more and more difficult. Peter seeks to remind them that despite their situation, as followers of Christ they are to be optimistic, hopeful even. Followers of Christ are to be people who overcome the world, not the other way around.

The temporal matters of this life are never going to destroy, steal, or cover up the reality of our hope. For those of us who struggle to find, and maintain hope in the midst of our lives, Peter is offering a new perspective. If we say Christ is victorious, that he has risen from the dead, and he sits at the right hand of God, why does our attitude not reflect this?

As I considered this thought, I was immediately transported back several years to the old variety show on television called Hew Haw. It was a silly kind of variety show that included a whole host of musical and comedic talents from the Grand Ol’ Opry in Nashville.

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Among their regular routines was a little ditty they used to sing that I can still remember. “Gloom, despair, agony on me. Deep down depression, excessive misery. If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all. Gloom, despair, agony on me.” This simple verse could be the mantra for a large number of people, Christians included. I can understand that people without faith being defeated by life, but why are believers so defeated?

I suspect it all has to do with perspective; how we view and analyze situations. Maybe we need to start where Peter starts; at the foundation. Just like the famous parable about building on the rock, everything begins with your foundation. Our foundation is Christ Jesus, and we are first and foremost a redeemed people. We are born again, or have a new life in Christ. Because of our new life, we have an inheritance kept for us in heaven, which is pure, undefiled, never changes and never decays.

Furthermore, Peter tells us that God will protect us until we receive that inheritance. This description by Peter is all about our status as Christ’s followers. It is the source of our hope, and the cause of our joy. Nothing else in all of creation matters if we have this hope. If we believe this to be true, that we have a perfect inheritance set aside for us, then our lives should reflect this truth.

It may sound harsh, perhaps even blunt, but the truth is, if you are not reassured and strengthened by this truth of God’s eternal plan for you, then you do not really believe it. One of the surest signs that we are not fully resting in this truth is that we worry. We worry about yesterday, today and tomorrow. We worry about what to eat, what to wear, how to pay the bills. We worry about our health, the health of our families, our jobs, our retirements, political instability in the world and so much more.

Worry is an awful thing, and I should know. Anxiety is one of my personal struggles. Anxiety or worry can cripple us, force us into inaction, and rob us of any peace. However, one thing I have never considered before is how worry, or anxiousness destroys our Christian witness. If we worry about the same things, and with the same intensity as the rest of the world, what difference does our faith really make.

Why would anyone want to adopt the faith we claim to have, when we are just as miserable as they are? Remember the story in Acts sixteen, when Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown into Jail. In pain and in the most awful place imaginable, no one would have blamed the men for worrying, or complaining, or just being miserable. Do you remember, however, what they did?

Luke tells us that they sang hymns and praised God. Their attitude was incredible, and infectious, as prisoners and the jailer himself comes to Christ. Now I expect at least one person, and probably more, would respond to what I just laid out before you by saying, “Well nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows my sorrow.”

Really? That’s the best we can do in response to the hope just presented to us? Okay, let us address the “elephant in the room”. Why do trials come upon us and what are we to do about them? First of all, we need to say that experiencing trials in life is a universal experience.

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Every man, woman, and child in the history of humanity has faced trials. In the Middle East they even have a little ceremony to express the universal nature of experiencing the good and the bad. In many homes, when you are a guest, you will be served two small cups. One will contain very strong and bitter coffee. The other will contain very sweet tea. As a guest, you are expected to consume both, symbolizing that life contains bitter things as well as sweet things.

Even though misery loves company, knowing the universal nature of trials doesn't answer the question of why they exist or why God permits them to occur. Peter's answer may not be immediately satisfying, but it is the truth and we need to hear it. First of all, in verse 6 there is a very scary phrase that sets the tone for what follows. Peter writes, "Even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while."

The word "many" is scary, even though the words "a while" temper things a bit by suggesting a finite time frame for trials. Remember, Peter is writing to a fellowship that is under intense persecution. I suspect that they were discouraged and pressured to abandon their faith in Christ. Peter's response is to say that these trials are necessary and they have a purpose. Pardon me?

How can such awful experiences have any purpose at all? How can they be of any benefit to me? Peter introduces a purpose for our trials by saying they refine our faith. The image used here is familiar one for most of us. Gold when it is pure is 24 karats; however, gold out of the ground rarely is 24 karats. It is often mixed with other metals, or just embedded in rocks. In any given nugget found in the earth, you can have a number of other materials other than just gold.

Therefore, it is necessary in wanting to increase the value of the gold, to refine it. Refining means to heat up the gold, and treat with certain chemicals, to remove everything but the valuable metal. It takes a tremendous amount of ore to get but a small amount of pure gold. Perhaps that is why gold is considered a precious metal. It is rare, and it is difficult to process. Precious is a good word to remember when we look at Peter's letters, as it is one of his favourite words.

For the miner, the gold is the precious or valuable thing. It is the end product of lots of toil, and often intensive investment of resources. Everything else the miner finds, is worthless, and is cast aside in order to find and process that gold.

In God's view of us, the one thing he longs to see, the one thing that is precious in his work in our lives, is faith. Peter, however, is suggesting that our faith is anything but pure. Well, we kind of already knew that. Our own experience with faith reveals it is less than pure. Mixed up in our faith are impurities.

These impurities can include many things such as: pride, selfishness, sin, lack of focus, ignorance, fear, doubt, hardness of heart and so much more. Peter's analogy of refining gives us the sense that the nugget of pure faith is in us all, but there so much unwanted stuff that mixes with it and distorts it.

Trials force us to forego the useless stuff, the baggage and garbage of our lives.

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Trials force us to rely more on God than ourselves. Trials especially, remind us that we are not in charge, that there are things in this world that we have no control over. We are at the mercy of forces, powers and principalities far beyond our reason and strength. I remember in seminary we were reflecting on the passage about how it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter heaven.

Someone in the class asked Dr. Ken Jackson, that in consideration of this verse, how you reach out to a rich person. How do you communicate their need for Christ? His answer could have come right out of this passage from 1 Peter; to reach a rich person you pray for a crisis. A crisis their money cannot fix. Then and only then will they realize their vulnerability and need for God.

For more than six hundred years the Hapsburgs exercised political power in Europe. When emperor Franz-Joseph 1 of Austria died in 1916, his was the last of the extravagant imperial funerals. A procession of dignitaries and elegantly dressed court officials escorted the coffin, draped in the black and gold imperial colours. The procession was accompanied by a military band that continuously played somber funeral music.

The procession ended at the Capuchin Monastery in Vienna. At the bottom was a great iron door leading to the Hapsburg family crypt. Behind the iron door was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna. The officer in charge of the procession followed the prescribed ceremony, established centuries before. "Open!" He cried. "Who goes there?" responded the Cardinal.

"We bear the remains of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz Joseph 1, by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Styrgia..." The officer continued to list the Emperor's thirty-seven titles. "We know him not," replied the Cardinal. "Who goes there?"

The officer spoke again, this time using a much-abbreviated list used in times of expediency. "We know him not." The Cardinal said again. "Who goes there?" The officer tried again, stripping the emperor of all but the humblest of titles: "We bear the body of Franz-Joseph, our brother, a sinner like all of us." At that the doors swung open and Franz-Joseph was admitted. (Fresh Illustrations for Preaching, p.94)

Peter is telling his readers, and that includes us, that all our accomplishments, titles, and treasures don't matter a hill of beans in God's eyes. What we value is not what God values. What we cling to as our "Precious" like Gollum and his ring, is not what God considers precious.

Faith is what ultimately matters. Trusting Christ even when we have not seen him is what is valuable. Yet as frustrating as the search for faith may seem to us, there is incredibly good news in Peter's words. The raw material of that faith is in us all. The gold is there, but it needs to be refined. It needs to be purified. When trials come upon us our response is not to cry out, "O woe is me", but rather to go to prayer.

Pricilla J. Owens has captured this call to faith very well with her composed words of the famous hymn.

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*Will your anchor hold in the storms of life, when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tide lifts, and the cables strain, will your anchor drift, or firm remain?*

*It will surely hold in the straits of fear, when the breakers tell that the reef is near;  
Though the tempest rave and the wild winds blow, not an angry wave shall our bark o're-flow.*

*It will surely hold in the floods of death, when the waters cold chill our latest breath;  
On the rising tide it can never fail, while our hopes abide within the veil.*

*When our eyes behold, the dawning light, the city of gold, our harbour bright,  
We shall anchor fast to the heavenly shore, with the storms all past forever more.*

*Can you say with conviction the chorus with me?  
We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll; fastened to the  
rock which cannot move, grounded firm and*