

1 Peter 3:13-22 “The Hope That is In You”

Before I get too far into our text this week, I want to put some things into perspective. I want to take a little time to talk about what it means to be a follower of Christ in *this* time and place. But before I do, let's talk about what it means to be a Christian in *other* parts of the world. Let's take North Korea for example. In North Korea, citizens are expected to worship and follow their exalted leader who is, at the moment, Kim Jong Un. If you're a follower of Jesus that means you *aren't* following Kim Jong Un and that makes you an enemy of the state. That's not to say there are no Christians in North Korea. Supposedly a little over 1% of the population is, but I'm not sure how anyone is able to gather enough data to make this claim. Because if you're a citizen of North Korea, I imagine you just *don't say* you follow Jesus to anyone who asks. If you do, you could wind up in a labor camp. And most people don't make it out of North Korean labor camps alive. Okay, but that's North Korea, right? You sort of expect that.

Okay, let's go over to the African continent. Some of the fastest growing churches in the world are in Africa, so that must mean the powers-that-be over there are okay with Christians, right? Not even close. In Somalia, the radical Islamic group al-Shabaab publically says it wants to rid their country of Christians. And like North Korea, it is illegal for Somalians to own a bible. And those who are even suspected of following Jesus can be killed on the spot. It's hard to estimate what percent of the Somalian population is Christian because no one will openly admit it. Sudan isn't much different than Somalia. Their government turns a blind eye to individuals and groups who kill Christians. In fact, the government, on occasion, has targeted Christians in bombing raids. Okay, but what about countries in Africa who have *large* populations of Christians? In Nigeria 48% of the population identify as Christians. Surely they get a break! Since the rise of Boko Haram, another radical Islamic group, thousands of Christians have been abducted or killed. Children of Christian parents are being denied access to schools and clean water is being cut off in predominantly

Christian villages. Kenya is probably the most Christian nation on the African continent. Christians make up 72% of the population which is only 6% less than here in the United States! But Christians have become the primary targets of all sorts of terrorist groups. Because of this, many churches have installed metal detectors and hired armed guards. Same story in Ethiopia, another majority Christian country.

What about countries in the Middle East where Christianity started? We have a Syrian Orthodox Church that meets here in our building. They will tell you that the way they're able to practice their faith here is a lot different than how they were ever able to practice it in Syria. 700,000 Christians have fled Syria just since the start of the 2011 civil war. In the parts of the country where ISIS has taken over, Christians are abducted and killed. Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan ... all in similar situations. We have a family in one of our DOC churches Sacramento whose kids go to our summer camp. They were chased from Pakistan all the way across the fertile crescent until they eventually fled to the United States.

So we have it pretty easy here in the United States. If you are a Christian here in the United States, the odds are very high that none of these things I've mentioned have happened or will happen to you. As I've said before ... please-please-please do not say you are "persecuted for your faith" when someone challenges you about your religious beliefs on Facebook, or at a barbeque, or if someone rips your little "Jesus fish" ornament from your car or gives you a dirty look if you pray over your meal in a restaurant. Because we've got about 100 Syrian brothers and sisters in Christ who meet in this building who would laugh and say, "Oh sweetie ... you have no idea what persecution is."

We've been working our way through the book of 1st Peter which was written to Christians in the first century who were actually being persecuted. Scholars aren't always in agreement about whether it's the kind of state-sponsored persecution that was carried out by Roman emperors like Nero or Domitian or Trajan, but they agree that it was

definitely more severe than dealing with the barista at the local Starbucks who says, “happy holidays” instead of “merry Christmas.” Most scholars believe that it was written for a particular fellowship of Christians in Rome who claimed the Apostle Peter as their founder ... their patron saint.

This letter was written to give hope to the Christians who faced everything from full-blown state-sponsored persecution all the way down to the kind of harassment and prejudice that many religious minorities faced in that time and place. However you want to look at it, being a Christian was not easy for the readers of 1st Peter. Now ... don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that Christians today don't face tough times. I recognize that Christians in this country experience prejudice, harassment, and are on the receiving end of some harsh criticism ... some understandably so, but mostly because of negative stereotypes. For me, a lot of what I deal with as a pastor is people's misinterpretation of Christianity. “Oh, you all don't believe in science,” or “You're all so judgmental.” Then there's “You're all so hateful and homophobic,” or “You're no better than ISIS because you want to convert everyone and control the government.” Then there's my favorite, “You're all such hypocrites,” to which I say, “Everyone is a hypocrite at some level, but you can't lay the burden of basic human hypocrisy all on Christians.”

So with that, I think 1st Peter has a lot to say to us *today* even though we live in a different cultural context. When you get down to the bare bones of what the author is saying in this passage it's: “Jesus is Lord because He is risen.” (We're still in the Season of Easter until Pentecost in the Park!) That's the word of hope. That's why they followed Jesus in the first place. We, in this day and age, call ourselves a people of the resurrection, so this is a claim that we can get *our* heads wrapped around too. And so because this is something Jesus' followers in any place and time can lay claim to, we then have an answer for those who demand to know why we can still be so hopeful even when we're under pressure.

“Why? Why dear first-century Christian living in Rome why do you still claim to follow Jesus when the government and all these hostile Gentiles and Jews makes it so difficult for you? Why do you still proclaim the risen Christ if you could go to jail for it ... or worse?” The author says, “Because God was faithful in raising Jesus from the dead, so you be faithful too.” Okay then, “Why? Why dear *twenty-first century Christian* living in the United States ... why do *you* still proclaim the risen Christ when people may make unfair assumptions about you and tell you that you’re a hypocritical bigot?” Because God is faithful, and so you should be faithful as well.

And believe me, this isn’t as easy as it sounds! Because in our faithfulness, we’re told not to return evil for evil. Because sometimes we just want to slap the heck out of people who want to blame us for the world’s problems. We’re ready to put on our verbal boxing gloves when people want to ascribe feelings and motivations to us that we don’t have *at all!* We think, “If you say one more thing about my ‘blind, naïve faith in a violent, patriarchal sky-God,’ I swear I’m going to rain holy fire down on you like ... oh ... shoot. That kind of plays into their hands and defeats the purpose!” Which is why Peter says to answer with gentleness and reverence. Daggone it. But what if I don’t *want* to answer in gentleness and reverence? Well, when we answer with gentle reverence, we’re maintaining the high road. This is basic Sermon on the Mount stuff: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account ... rejoice and be glad for your reward will be great in heaven.” And not only does this deflect the attack, it’s also an invitation to follow Jesus, the one who took up the cross and empowered others instead of looking to be empowered.

We’re not always good at that, and I’m afraid that some of our reactions to what we interpret as slander plays right into the hands of those who dish it out. When we want to make a big deal out of the supposed “war on Christmas” or when we picket our local school district offices

because we want to “put prayer back in our schools” even though I guarantee you that there is a lot of prayer going on at Chico High during finals week ... when we want to go to the mat for whatever current culture-war issue we want to fight about, it does *not* achieve the goal of what Jesus and Peter and most everyone else in the New Testament says we should work towards. Even in the Proverbs of the Old Testament it is said that “A gentle answer turns away wrath.” That’s Proverbs 15:1 in case you were wondering. You know, you’d think some Christians would get kind of tired and worn out condemning the world, or living their lives in fear, or minimizing all the other religions in the world to make theirs look good ... when really ... they’re not making *anyone* look good. Maybe when some Christians finally get tired of being ... terrible in the name of Jesus, they’ll actually be able to reflect Jesus and bring his mercy and compassion and forgiveness to the places where you don’t see it much. Then maybe people won’t be so quick to condemn our faith before they even know us or anything about our faith. Maybe they’ll understand the message of hope that we bear witness to.

And that’s what this passage is. It’s a letter about holding on to our hope. It’s about speaking our truth and speaking it with love. This is about proclaiming the one we call “Christ” who came to save and to show us how to live as citizens under God’s reign. And this all goes back to what we were talking about last week. This hope calls us to live out our “priestly imperative” to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk faithfully and humbly, which ... is not easy and not always welcome.