

“Peace Be With You”

1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-20

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Like so many of you, over the course of this past week(s) I have had the opportunity to catch up on *some* of my reading. And there were a few quotes that I found especially noteworthy... particularly with regards to how people were responding to the challenges of COVID-19... and wanted to share them with you: ***“Clinging to their faith, (they were) grateful for what they do have instead of what they don’t have... able to share... with people who really needed it during a difficult time.”*** One said that ***“I’m so grateful for my God-given perseverance and endurance.”*** Another that ***“I’m thankful to know I have a God that is in control of all situations and invites me to trust and lean on him.”*** Yet another said that ***“Gratitude is a mantra I live by, a mindset...”*** One parent said that ***“This has brought our family closer to God and made us humble ourselves for His love.”*** One longer story spoke of ***“A friend (who)+ was visiting and invited me to join her for church... via Zoom.”*** This same person went on to say, ***“More novel than the virtual service was the experience of joining a friend of 20 years in prayer.. something happened that was both personal and intimate.”*** ***“The threat of a life-threatening disease opens us up to the possibility of grace.”*** ... ***“What matters, in good times and bad, is people and community. It has taken a terrible virus to remind us of this eternal truth. Surely, there is grace in that.”*** ... ***“From now on, I think that every- thing we say and do has to be prefaced by the question: ‘Is it helpful’”***...

SOOO... where do you think that this plethora of ‘faith-filled’ quotes come from? Franklin Graham’s blog? *“Christianity Today?”* A Baptist Church website? NO. They all came from one place: *“The American Press.”* Yes, a secular, public community newspaper. Most of the latter ones by a syndicated political columnist... one NOT named ‘Thomas’ or ‘Buchanan.’ Surprised?

OK, here’s another ‘quiz,’ but this one will be much shorter. See if this statement sounds familiar: ***“A small group of close friends were isolated in their house, fearful of even opening the door for the threat of death.”*** Another quote from *“The American Press?”* Well, you’d be somewhat close. But rather than being from the works of

Publishing Editor John Ware, this was from another 'John'... John the Gospel 'Editor.'

And the point? Well, what do these writings, from two VERY different sources, have in common? Both were written as expressions of FAITH. The authors of these various writings ALL had a common purpose and mind, and that was to communicate the REALITY of their **hope** and **trust**... not merely in the ability of *man* to resolve their challenges and fears, but their confidence in a power much greater than their own. These testimonies are to be a living witness to all who would hear of the power of the resurrected Christ. That the same Jesus who appeared to those first disciples... that same Spirit of His that spoke to the people in these articles... is the same voice of Jesus who also speaks to you and me... **"Peace Be With You."**

This passage from 1st Peter is 'chock-FULL' of words of encouragement in the promises of God fulfilled in His Son Jesus. *"Yeshua."* "He SAVES." I want to encourage each of you to go back and reread this passage, verse-by-verse, phrase-by-phrase. After all, each one of you is a 'priest,' right? 😊 In the words of our Reformed tradition, you ALL are members of the ***"Priesthood of all believers."*** Remember, tho, those aren't just the words of Luther, or Calvin, or in a church 'Book of Order'... but rather, from THE Book, in the words of that same Apostle Peter in the next chapter:

"You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

Note that your status as God's 'chosen,' 'His own special people' called as a 'royal priesthood,' does not include 'Presbyterian' in the description... nor does it say that we are to be 'proclaiming God's praises' only at 2525 2nd Ave. OR 305 W. Hudspeth. WHEREVER YOU ARE... NO MATTER YOUR DENOMINATIONAL 'FLAVOR' OF CHRISTIANITY... you and I are to 'proclaim,' 'EX-claim' the praises of the One who has 'called us out of the darkness into His marvelous light.'

BUT, that's not always easy to do, IS IT? Pick up the paper... turn on the news... log on to your computer, or read the news alert on your phone... there's a LOT of 'darkness' in our world right now, isn't there? Unemployment. Hunger. Illness. Death.

As we look around and see so much suffering and loss, sometimes it's not so easy to 'proclaim,' in Peter's words, ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,"*** is it? In our role as 'priests,' intercessors, representatives of the Risen Christ we have just celebrated, how do we shed God's 'marvelous light' in the midst of such death and despair?

For ONE, we must believe, and proclaim, that **the grave is NOT the end.** By virtue of the empty tomb, we must believe that death is just a 'rite of passage' for those who believe... a 'graduation' to the ultimate 'institution of Higher learning.' By the death and resurrection of our Lord and Friend Jesus Christ, WE... his earthly 'family'... WILL gain an **inheritance.** NOT like any earthly 'inheritance' we might receive from our natural born family... but one that is ***"imperishable, pure, everlasting... kept in heaven for YOU."***

As those 'priests,' our concern must be how to minister to those who do NOT believe in this 'inheritance' that is being 'kept in heaven.' Those who labor in FEAR for what death may bring. The uncertainty of what lies beyond the grave. Even those first disciples, as confident as they should have been of the promises of eternal life through their 'BFF' ('Blessed Friend Forever') Jesus, were yet huddled behind closed doors, cowering in FEAR ... why? Perhaps fearful that they would suffer the same terrible death that their Teacher did. But when He appeared to them, allaying their fears, saying ***"Peace be with you"...*** AND showing them the deadly wounds on his quite ALIVE body... it was ***"THEN they rejoiced when they saw the Lord."*** (John 20:20) They KNEW that death would not have the final word in life... Jesus had conquered the grave, and that they need not fear death. In the same way, He wants us to have that same 'blessed assurance.' We too must trust that Christ is there for us, saving us from the fear of death, calmly saying to you and me, ***"Peace be with you."***

This is NOT to say that it is just the fear of **dying** that has so many of our nation, and world, so distraught. There are many of us faithful Christians who are confident that, no matter what, we WILL, in Peter's words, ***"receive the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls."*** (1 Peter. 1:9) But we can still be anxious for the safety of our loved ones, and indeed, those many perfect strangers who are suffering each day. If not

suffering directly from this disease physically, but financially, emotionally, spiritually. Those who are putting themselves'... as well as their families and friends... 'in harm's way'. Not only doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers, but grocery clerks, delivery men/women, fast food workers, and others who have direct contact with the public. How do we NOT fear for others safety? How can we, as compassionate, caring Christians, NOT anguish for the suffering of our fellow man and woman?

Well, of course we must. But that anguish, that fear, must be supplanted, replaced, healed by FAITH. TRUST that the same God who also 'anguished' as His only Son suffered in terrible ways would ultimately see His precious child raised to life. That Jesus' pain, as intense as it was, was temporary. Our Lord Christ, even though in that Garden of Gethsemane asked that the cup of suffering be taken away... perhaps, his human nature experiencing some natural FEAR of the suffering to come... ultimately knew that God's perfect will for LIFE would be revealed. Jesus KNEW that though he would suffer various trials, tested by the intense fire of persecution and death, ultimately ***"the genuineness of his faith ... would be found to result in praise and glory and honor."*** (1 Peter 1:6-7) His faith greater than fear...

My friends, may we continue to be inspired by the example of our Lord Christ... that OUR faith will be greater than our fear. May we demonstrate a compassionate faith that shows God's mercy and grace to those who have suffered loss. May we be confident that in the end that same Father God, who weeps over the suffering of all His children, will comfort them and raise them to life. May our own lives be a living witness to the genuineness of our faith. Let us pray for the strength to live out that faith in the same ways of those I quoted earlier from the paper... statements made by ordinary folks just like you and me: Let us ***"Cling to our faith ...able to share...be granted God-given perseverance and endurance ... to know God is in control ...invites me to trust and lean on him."*** ... having a constant 'attitude of gratitude' ...growing closer to one another, and to God... through Prayer...that we can have **new, personal, intimate spiritual experiences**, even with long-time friends ***"What matters, in good times and bad, is people and community. It has taken a terrible, life-threatening disease to remind us of***

this eternal truth... opening us up to the possibility of GRACE."

I would leave you with a couple of examples from this past week of individuals who exemplified faithful confidence in the grace of God. First, you may recognize the picture of these hands. [pic] They were pictured in that same newspaper, belonging to a couple, Pastor Steven and Barbara Randolph, as they both lay in a hospital bed with CoronaVirus. This faithful couple would pass from life, to death, to eternal life, within minutes of each other. Those who knew them had no doubt that they went with no reservations, knowing that they would walk hand-in-hand into the waiting arms of their Heavenly Father.

The second picture will not be familiar to any of you... unless our daughter Christine is watching. The young man is 15 year old Jake Berglund of Jacksonville FL. His parents were good friends of Christine and Jon, who served with his Dad in the Navy. Jake was diagnosed with leukemia two years ago, and though battling the illness valiantly, in early April was not given much time to live. He chose not to stay in the hospital, but go home to spend his last days with his family and friends. What he also was very insistent on was to be re-baptized. His Christian identity was so important to him that no matter how weak he was... not even able to climb into the 'baptismal pool' (hottub) by himself... receiving that Sacrament so closely linked to that identity was of paramount importance. So, surrounded by his parents and siblings, he was baptized on the Saturday before Easter. The next day... Resurrection Sunday... He was received into the Church Triumphant.

Fellow members of God's 'royal priesthood,' these three individuals were shining examples of ones who KNEW that the grave was NOT the end. They were confident that they would receive their inheritance... not earthly, but ***"imperishable, pure, everlasting."*** They received ***"the outcome of their faith... the salvation of their souls."*** May we... like Steven, Barbara, and Luke... embrace the eternal truth of Peter's words: ***"though you do not see him now, you love him.. you believe in him... and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8)***

How can we be so sure of this 'indescribable and glorious joy' for those who

believe? Simple. It's front page news: *"He is Risen! The Darkness is shattered."* And, after all, if it's written in the newspaper... like the Internet... it MUST be true, right! No... we know its truth because it is written in here [Bible] ... and in here [point to heart] May the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, this day, and forever more. AMEN.

PRAYER TIME

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit alone in a room." (Blaise Pascal)

PRAYER

"And people stayed at home And read books And listened And they rested
And did exercises And made art and played And learned new ways of being
And stopped and listened More deeply
Someone meditated... someone prayed... Someone met their shadow
And **people began to think differently** And **people healed**.
And in the absence of people who Lived in ignorant ways
Dangerous, meaningless and heartless, **The earth also began to heal**
And when the danger ended and **People found themselves**
They **grieved** for the dead And made **new choices**
And dreamed of **new visions** And created **new ways of living**
And completely **healed the earth Just as they were healed.**"

(Kathleen O'Mara, 1869 Reprinted during Spanish flu Pandemic, 1919)

Blessed be the **God** and **Father** of our **Lord Jesus Christ**! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an **inheritance** that is **imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven** for **YOU**,⁵ who are being **protected** by the **power of God** through **faith** for a **salvation** ready to be **revealed** in the **last time**.⁶ **In this you REJOICE, EVEN** if now for a **little while** you have had to **suffer various trials**,⁷ so that the **genuineness of your faith**—being **more precious than gold** that, though **perishable**, is **tested by fire**—may be found to **result** in **praise** and **glory** and **honor** when **Jesus Christ** is **revealed**.⁸ Although you have **not seen**^[b] him, you **LOVE him**; and even though you **do not see him now**, you **BELIEVE in him** and **REJOICE** with an **indescribable** and **glorious joy**,⁹ for **you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls**. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

When it was **evening** on that day, the **first day of the week**, and the **doors** of the **house** where the **disciples** had met were **locked for fear** of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and SAID, “**Peace be with you.**”²⁰ After he said this, he **SHOWED** them his **hands** and his **side**. **THEN** the disciples **rejoiced** when they **saw the Lord**.

(John 20:19-20)