***HOLY HOPE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 16, 2023

Texts: 1 Peter 1:3-9, 13-16 and Psalm 16:7-11

*As he who called you is holy (*that would be Jesus, in case you were wondering*), be holy yourselves in all your conduct.* That is the charge to the churches to which 1 Peter was written, and thus it is the charge to you and to me. *Be holy in all your conduct – in other words, all the time, everywhere, be holy!* How are you doing on that count, O holy people of God? Are you holy in ALL you do? If you say yes, just how holy are you? And if you say no, what might you do to be more holy – at least a little more holy – in all you do?

In the church in Slippery Rock in which I grew up there was a college student who attended for a few years whose name was Tina. Tina was someone I would describe as veri-religious – one word – meaning, she was slightly more religious than God. She only read Christian books and only listened to Christian music and only wanted to associate with Christian people – at least those she deemed sufficiently Christian; she carried her Bible pretty much everywhere she went as a sign of her holiness, and would respond to anyone with whom she disagreed with, “I’ll pray for you” which meant, “I’ll pray that you come around to my point of view.” She was unhappy most of the time because she found everyone else to be far too unholy for her to tolerate and was never really sure if she was holy enough to please God. She was pretty much insufferable – much too religious for her own good or mine or probably God’s! Is that what it means to *be holy in all you do*, because if so, then fulfilling that charge is going to make life pretty much insufferable and miserable for all of us! And that seems wholly inconsistent with what Peter (if it is indeed Peter who is writing, though that is doubtful) has to say in that letter we call 1 Peter.

The letter is written to “*the* *exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia*,” new Christians scattered across many lands who were trying to figure out what following Christ meant in their lives day to day. Some of them faced persecution for their beliefs. Yet the letter opens with a hopeful, encouraging tone with the blessing of “*new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*.” It is that same living hope we celebrated last Sunday with a chorus of alleluias, for the resurrection of Jesus is not just good news for him, but for all of us. “*Because I live you also will live*,” says Jesus, and in that promise is our living hope – not just hope for the future on that day we draw our last breath, but hope for each and every day, including this one! As William Sloane Coffin writes in *Letters to a Young Doubter*:

*I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence. So…on Easter we gather not, as it were, to close the show with the tune ‘Thanks for the Memory,’ but rather to reopen the show because ‘Jesus Christ is risen today.’[[1]](#endnote-1)*

In other words, our celebration of Easter is not our celebration of a happy ending to Jesus’ story, but rather the celebration of the living hope that we now hold for our stories going forward! That living hope shapes our outlook on this day and on the future. In his commentary on Psalm 5, Martin Luther describes the Christian as “*sinner in reality, yet saint in hope*.” To emphasize that reality in his own life, he is said to have declared:

*Even if I know that the world is coming to an end tomorrow, I will still go out today into the garden and plant an apple tree*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

There are those who would say that kind of hope is crazy, just as there were those who declared the resurrection a fantasy. But for us who are *sinners in reality, yet* *saints in hope*, it is that kind of living hope that we hold, hope that is lived out day to day, for it is hope grounded in what God has done and what God will yet do.

To *be holy in all your conduct* is to live with that kind of hope, to embrace it for yourself and for those you love and for the world. It is hope that is not unrealistic about the challenges we face as individuals, as a society, and as a world – failing health, climate change, wars, toxic politics, structural racism, systemic poverty, recurring gun violence, the deer eating all your tulips – the list goes on and on. Hope endures despite those challenges, in the face of those challenges. It is hope that enables us to keep on keeping on faithfully, come what may, for we trust that God is bigger than any of those challenges, and our hope lies in the power and love of that God!

1 Peter mentions specifically the various trials those early Christians suffered, but he encourages them to persevere in faith and with joy, for as Paul writes to the church in Rome, “*The sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us*.” Christian hope is not unrealistic about suffering; rather, it holds on to hope in the midst of suffering and offers reason to be joyful in the midst of it all! You heard it in the psalm we read this morning:

*I keep the LORD always before me;*

*because the LORD is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*

*Therefore, my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;*

*my body rests secure…*

The psalmist finds joy in the assurance of God’s presence, but note that he makes a conscious effort to remember God – to keep the Lord always before him. He is mindful of God’s presence not just when he goes to worship or just when he stops to pray or just when he is in trouble, but in all places in all times – always!

There are those who find God’s constant presence in their lives to be a burden, recalling that old Puritan saying: *If it feels good, it must be wrong*. But that is a corruption of the Gospel, for the good news really is news that is good, and God’s intent for us is to live with hope and with joy. Our problem is that we think we know better than God what will bring us that hope and joy. Advertisers go to great lengths to convince us that their answers are better than God’s, but they prove illusory and unsatisfactory in the long run. And God is in it for the long run – longer than you can imagine, longer than you can draw a breath – which brings us back to that charge in 1 Peter!

“*As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct*.” Hope and joy are marks of that holy living; they are not just for Easter Sunday. Hope and joy should well up within us every single day of our lives and be reflected in how we live day to day. It is that living that is at the heart of that charge, but with one significant modifier in its introduction: ***As he who called you is holy***, be holy… We are to be holy as Christ is holy, to live holy lives following Jesus’ example. And what did he show us by his example?

He reached out to those who were at the margins of society

and welcomed them.

He ate with tax collectors and sinners

with whom pious people would have nothing to do.

He welcomed children and suggested that we all should be like them

if we are to enter God’s Kingdom.

He called out the injustices of the religious establishment.

He offered forgiveness freely and urged us to do the same.

He prayed frequently and passionately.

He attended worship in his hometown synagogue.

He healed those who were sick and hurting.

He gave glory to God in all that he did.

If you would be holy, then you might try following Jesus’ example and living as he lived and loving as he loved and forgiving as he forgave and giving of yourself as he gave of himself. Jesus showed us how to BE HOLY; we need only follow that example, best summed up in the Great Commandment: *Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself*. That is what it means to be holy! It doesn’t mean carrying your Bible around wherever you go

and being so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good

and being veri-religious!

It means living joyfully and lovingly, full of great hope and aware of God’s constant presence with you and sure of God’s promises for you in the risen Christ! Eugene Peterson puts it wonderfully in these words:

*“’Holy’ is the best word we have for the all-encompassing, all-embracing life of God that transforms us into a uniquely formed and set-apart people. Holy is never a pious abstraction…It is something lived. It is the life of God breathed into and invigorating our lives.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Holy is as real as you and I and should be as tangible as the hands we put to work day to day. So, live as holy people – as sinners in reality, but saints in hope! Be holy this day and all days, in this place and in all places, in all that you say and all that you do and all that you are! For you were created in the image of a holy God who now charges you: **Be holy too!** Amen and amen.

1. William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, Westminster-John Knox Press: Louisville, 2005, pp.176-177 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb in the Forward to *Hope in Disarray*, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Pilgrim Press:2020, p.xi [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007, p.127 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)