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## In Defense of Hope

1 Peter 3:13-22

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 21, 2017,  
by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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Following my junior year of college, I spent the summer as an intern with an evangelist who traveled the country preaching at church camps for youth and revivals. This evangelist was quite familiar with the ways of church folks, especially those from, how can I say it kindly, more legalistic traditions. As a joke during his sermons, he would regularly share a saying that was part of the religious vernacular of the places he preached. It was a saying used to describe what it meant to be a morally upstanding, Christian young person. Maybe you've heard it before, it goes like this: "I don't smoke, drink or chew, or go with girls who do." I don't smoke, drink, or chew or go with girls who do: Christian morality, maybe even the Christian witness, stated in the negative.

If you grew up in certain parts of the Christian tradition—maybe the more conservative or fundamentalist strands—you know all too well the way that Christianity gets summed up in a series of actions not to be done or ways of being to stand against. If you learned Christianity in this way, you might think Christians are primarily the kind of people who "don't." I've been part of churches that were known for not being allowed to wear shorts or go to the movies or dance. In these settings, it is easy to perceive that to be Christian is to "not do." And this "not" version of Christianity is often experienced by those both outside and inside the faith as judgmental, hypocritical, and legalistic.

Of course, many of you did not grow up in churches like me. Maybe the churches with which you have been most familiar are known for a different kind of "not," namely not being any different than anyone else. Maybe the Christians who've shaped your vision of Christianity are just about like all the other people in your community: mostly nice; not very confrontational; maybe a little boring. Perhaps what you've learned is that to be Christian means to vote a certain way—either democratic or republican depending which church you attended—or to have manners and morals typical of the culture and social context around you. Perhaps being Christian has seemed socially and culturally convenient. It is easy to perceive that to be Christian is to not be that much different than you would be otherwise. And this "not any different" version of Christianity is often experienced by those both outside and inside the faith as relatively inconsequential to the overarching shape of one's life.

Surely neither of these versions of Christianity best characterized by the word "not" were what Peter had in mind as he wrote the Christians scattered as exiles, refugees, and aliens throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Sure, Peter and the early Christians knew they were called out and away from certain kinds of behaviors, activities, and ways of being in the world. Yet, it's challenging to imagine the early followers of Christ who were pressed on every side, persecuted, oppressed, and sometimes martyred for Christ being willing to suffer for a Christianity primarily known for what it is not.

Today's lesson from Peter provides us with a different image—a different way of imagining for what Christians could be known. Peter writes, "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is

good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.” Peter sets the standard for the church of having an eagerness and zeal for doing good. The early Christians knew plenty of people who had been harmed, who had suffered, who had even died for doing good as they followed Christ. And Peter does not assume any differently. Nevertheless, “doing good” is an activity that in Peter’s mind invites something other than reproach or scorn or harm from those around. Yet if suffering does come in pursuit of doing the right thing, Peter calls this a blessing. You can almost hear Jesus saying, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of God belongs to those who like Jesus suffer for good. Being known for doing good, for pursuing what is right and just—even if it leads to persecution—is what Peter expects the church to be known for.

And Peter presses the communities to whom he writes deeper still. “Do not fear what they fear and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” Here is where Peter’s picture of Christian life takes its most dramatic departure from common forms of Christian witness today. Peter tells a church—that is to be known for doing what is good, right, and just and suffering for it—to be prepared to give a defense. Peter expects those who are not followers of the Way to demand an account from Christians. Surprisingly, he does not expect them to demand an accounting for Christians being judgmental or legalistic or mostly nice. Peter expects that in watching and witnessing the good works of the church that persist in suffering, people will ask, “why this hope?” They will look at the church, see hope among the people, and want to know why? Peter expects the church to be put on trial—both formally and informally—to testify to and make a defense of their hope. Imagine it: those without faith in Christ will see good, and question the hope that inspires it. I wonder what that would be like: to be put on trial for hope.

What could be said in defense of hope? The world that surrounded the early church was no less full of suffering and challenge and pain than our own. Maybe it was more so. Life for all first century people was surely more precarious than our own. And for those early Christians, the threat of suffering and death was more real than anything we Christians in North America face today. So why hope and not fear or worry or concern or dread? Peter gives us what we need to know prior to telling the people to be ready to give their defense. He says, “in your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord.” Peter understood that the Christian life—the life marked by pursuing good and doing right—must be shaped by having Christ at the center. Peter says, “In your hearts”—that is the center of your being which determines how you imagine and envision the world— “in your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord.” To do this is to exalt, honor, and revere the crucified/resurrected Jesus. To sanctify Christ as Lord is to allow your way of seeing and experiencing the world to be formed by the one who inspired the hope of a different world—a world marked by forgiveness and freedom, justice and peace and love. To sanctify Christ as Lord in one’s heart is to allow Christ’s holy light to shine from the center of one’s being so that darkness is overcome and God’s glory is revealed. Sanctifying Christ as Lord is allowing Christ to rule every action and reaction, every motivation and impulse, every thought and word and deed, so God’s kingdom is made known.

Those who stand in defense of hope are those who have had the core of who they are ordered and re-ordered by the story of Jesus and the triune God to whom his life points. It’s Jesus that inspires hope that persists through flood and fire. It’s Jesus that enables people to see God’s presence and activity in both tragedy and triumph. Jesus is the reason for the early Christians’ hope, and this same Jesus is the reason for our hope today.

Maybe you need reminded of who this Jesus is. Maybe today you need to be reminded of what once stirred within you a hope beyond comprehension. Maybe today you find that you are more often fueled by fear than by hope, and you have grown weary. Maybe your tank is simply empty. If so, let me remind you today about this Jesus who gives us hope. Jesus—"the only son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages"—is the one who came as an infant child, born of the Spirit and Mary, lowly and dependent to rescue all people from hopelessness and despair. Jesus—God from God—is the one who transgressed boundaries to demonstrate that God's love extends beyond any restrictions we try to put on it. Jesus—light from light—is the one who at the beginning of his ministry unrolled a scroll to proclaim that his life and work would be about shining good news for the poor, liberation to those in captivity and new sight for those who are blind. Jesus—true God from true God—is the one who demonstrated God's lavish and abundant love by turning water to wine. Jesus—of the same essence as the Father—is the one who offered living water at a well to a socially marginalized and outcast woman from the wrong people and the wrong faith. Jesus—through whom all things were made—is the one who when the disciples were trembling in fear at the storm that overcame them, he spoke a word and the storm was stilled. Jesus—who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was made incarnate, and fully human—he is the one who was like us in every way except sin and who mourned when his friends mourned and wept when his friend died. Jesus—who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered and buried—showed us there was no place so low we could go and not find him there. Jesus—who rose again from the grave—is the one the grave could not hold, the one who after 3 days got up to put death to death. Jesus is the one who by rising from the dead and ascending to heaven declared that neither sin, nor death, nor hell, nor any principality or power would have the final word. He is the one who by his resurrection proclaimed that God's kingdom of love and life would triumph and never end. This is the Jesus who gives us reason to hope today.

I am challenged and inspired by those who live by this hope. Maybe you too have those who've testified to this hope and helped you know Jesus more. It was the hope found in Jesus that drove Dr. John M. Perkins to suffer in pursuit of God's good kingdom. As a civil rights activist and a Christian Community Development practitioner, John Perkins has given his life to pursuing the beloved community. Early in his work, Dr. Perkins was protesting unjust and segregated business practices within his town. He along with a few others from the protest were arrested. At the jail house, Dr. Perkins was tortured and severely beaten by white police officers. Surprisingly, through this experience, Dr. Perkins was given a vision for holistic ministry that had racial reconciliation and repair at its core. Dr. Perkins has spent his life testifying to and defending the hope he has found in Jesus. Hope has surely been the anthem of Dr. Perkins life.

Today we have the opportunity to claim a Christian faith known for its hope rather than for what it is not. Peter called the early church and calls us still to be ready to take the stand for this hope. We can be the ones who testify to the hope—that as Pauli Murray says—is a song in a weary throat. We can provide a defense of hope in the midst of a world that has gone mad. As people whose imaginations are shaped by the story of Jesus, we have the opportunity to push hope instead of fear and to proclaim Christ as the reason for our hope. Because of Jesus, we can be people whose heartbeat, whose future, whose banner and home, whose song and anthem is hope.

May hope be the anthem of our lives together. May we live so marked by hope, that others ask for us to tell them why. And then may we tell the story of Jesus—the one who came loving and serving. May we tell the story of Jesus—the one who walked with the oppressed and forsaken. May we tell the story of Jesus—the one who proclaimed good news, particularly to the poor, and release to

those in captivity. May we tell the story of Jesus—the one who defeated death and fear and hell. And as we tell the story, may Christ be lifted, glorified, honored and worshiped as Lord. Amen.