

1st Peter 1:3-9 “Choose Hope”

No matter what year it is, the suggested gospel reading the week after Easter is always Doubting Thomas. And you can only do so much with Thomas before you just get tired of him. Okay, okay, we get it. The guy who wasn't around when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples wouldn't believe unless he saw it with his own eyes. Then Jesus appeared to him, and said, 'Blessed are the ones who don't see but still believe.'" Moral of the story – You don't need proof to have faith. Thomas learns his lesson, life goes on ... amen, glory be to God ... see you in K-Hall for coffee. So what I went with this year is 1st Peter. And I've got to tell you, that's not my favorite book in the Bible. It's one of those books where it's really easy to take a verse or two out of context and use it to beat people over the head with. So I thought, "Okay, rather than being lazy and avoiding this book, let's tackle it." That's the beauty of this little Bible reading guide we call the lectionary. It forces you to deal with material that you'd rather not tackle.

So here's the rule about dealing with any book in the Bible ... especially if it has things in it that you feel you have to apologize for. Always, always, always put yourself in the place of the receiver. And in order to do that, you've got to learn as much as possible about the people to whom the book was written. This helps because then some of the things that make you cringe if you're just reading it with modern-day North American eyes ... they make more sense. Here's what's going on with the readers of this letter: They are suffering. And not the kind of suffering that some experience when the local In-and-Out Burger goes out of business. It's not the kind of suffering that comes with getting stuck in Bay Area traffic or when you go back for that third bowl of chili even though your body is saying, "That's probably not a good idea." The suffering that these readers are going through is happening because they follow Jesus and they are being persecuted for it. And not in the modern-day American understanding of "Christian persecution" either. This isn't, "Starbucks hates Jesus because they won't put 'Merry Christmas' on their Holiday cups." This is honest-to-goodness,

government-sanctioned, people are being singled out, marginalized, and placed in danger persecution. So this letter from Peter answers the question that was on so many Christian's minds in this remote part of the Roman Empire: "What do you do when your faith in Jesus becomes the *source of your troubles?*"

It's a letter of encouragement written to a group of people who are at the end of their rope. On a good day, they're dealing with people's prejudice and hate. On a bad day, they're being arrested and thrown in jail. On a really bad day, they're being killed. So what's happening is that these Christian's very identity is being shaped by this persecution. It's how they define themselves. It's not, "People will know we're Christians because we love Jesus and want to serve and follow him," it's, "people will know we're Christians because we're the ones who are suffering." It's like they became the Eeyores of Northern Asia Minor. You could identify them by the rain cloud that followed them all the time. So Peter tells them, "No! Your identity is in Christ! It's the result of you being born again ... not just *renewed* but actually *transformed* in a radical way ... a way that changes you from the inside out!" Our trust and hope isn't shaped by our temptations or our trials. We need to look beyond what we're going through and focus on to whom we put our trust. So what ... is this is Peter's "Don't worry be happy" letter? His, "Just ignore what you're going through, it will go away" message? No.

Twenty-two years ago, Mary and I were youth leaders in a cluster of Disciples churches in the New River Valley in Virginia. Virginia was such a big Region we had 11 districts ... which I think we call "mission clusters" here in this region. And each district had its own youth council. So every year, each district would choose a representative from their council to send to the Regional Assembly ... what we call "Annual Gathering" here. Then the Assembly would vote to accept the district's representatives and that's how you got your Regional youth council. So Mary and I were the adult leaders for District 2. Every quarter we'd have a district-wide youth event, so in the Fall we'd have a "fifth quarter" party. We'd go to one of the big school football games and

afterward we'd go to a YMCA, have pizza, and swim and play racquetball or basketball or whatever else you could do at the YMCA. In the winter we'd have a Christmas gathering. Summer was all about camps, so we didn't have anything then. So our Spring event was usually something that was sort of outdoorsy ... we'd try to get out and do something in nature. So the youth planning council got together back in December and decided that we needed to take a hike to these waterfalls called "The Cascades." And we decided to do this around the end of April. The weather was usually warm and sunny by then, but it was before the snakes came out. It would be perfect! We'd hike up to the falls, maybe take a dip in the beautiful, crystal-clear pool at the bottom of the falls. We'd hike back and roast hot dogs at the park near the trail head. It was a solid plan. The kids did a great job promoting it in their churches. People were excited. It looked like a lot of kids were going to be able to come. What could go wrong, right?

What we didn't expect was rain. And I'm not talking about the warm, 15 – 20 minute rain shower that would pass through every day between 3:00 – 7:00. This was an all-day downpour. And it was not warm by any stretch of the imagination. There we were at the trail head looking up at the sky one minute, then down at the increasingly muddy trail the next. Too late to cancel. Everyone was there. We're out in the middle of rural Giles County, so it wasn't like we could say, "Eh ... let's go to the local bowling alley" or something like that. So we decided right there on the spot that it wasn't really raining. It was all in our imaginations. "Rain!? Phht! What rain? This is liquid sunshine!" So we hiked up the two mile trail singing songs like, "You Are My Sunshine" and "Walking on Sunshine." The kids kept saying, "What a lovely day! It doesn't get much better than this! Anyone need any sun screen?" When we got to the falls, one brave girl ... Jenna ... decided that she was going to go for a swim. And she did. On the way back, the novelty of our little denial exercise started to fade. I don't know how it happened, but that two mile hike up to the falls started to feel like a five mile hike coming down. No one was singing anymore. All you could hear was the chattering of teeth and complaints about how cold it was

getting. By the time we got back to the park at the trailhead, we realized we couldn't even start a fire to cook our hotdogs. So we all piled into cars and vans and went to the Pearisburg church where we all huddled in the basement of our parsonage with every spare towel and blanket in the house wrapped around those kids. We had a house guest who was kind enough to boil the hot dogs and we just kind of sat there reflecting on how denial isn't a very good approach to life's challenges.

And that's what Peter was saying to these churches in Northern Asia Minor. Following Christ in tough times does not mean practicing denial. It's not ignoring what's going on around us. It's choosing to focus on the promises we receive through Jesus. It's about focusing on living our lives as people that choose to be rooted and grounded in the *hope* of the Risen Christ. We *choose* to live lives of hope because of what God has done. I had Rabbi Sara Abrams on my radio show Friday, and she talked about how God gave the people of Israel the freedom of choice. That's one of the greatest gifts that God has given us. But God didn't leave it at just that. God encouraged the people to choose *life*! By doing so, we elevate our souls.

This whole matter of suffering? It's only for a season. Think of it like this ... you're like gold. You're perishable, yes ... but you're also valuable. And remember that the way you test gold for purity is by fire. And herein is where salvation lies. Not salvation in the way that we tend to think of it ... not as a "ticket to heaven," but as a way to be reborn into a living hope. How? Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In our tradition, we celebrate that re-birth ... that resurrection ... through the act of baptism. Baptism is a symbolic celebration of the resurrection of Jesus as the Living Christ, *and* a celebration of the birth-like entry into a new, hope-filled life that death has no power over.

And at our Table, we encounter another related symbol of our faith and of our experience of crossing into a new and resurrected life. Baptism marks our *point of entry* into this life, but sharing the bread and cup, marks our *ongoing* engagement with this life. And it's by coming to eat

and drink from this table that we renew our commitment week by week. In approaching this table we are saying “Yes, I still mean it ... my hope is solid. My identity is in Christ. My life is yours. And I am still depending on you, Lord, for the strength to enable me to live it.”

Amen