

A Living Faith
1Peter 1:1-5
June 23, 2019

This opening paragraph of Peter's letter to the Christians who are scattered over what is now modern day Turkey follows the opening greeting one finds in ancient letter writing convention. The authority of the writer is established from the beginning. Whether or not it is Peter's work it is certainly founded upon his authority as one of the chief apostles. The recipients are also named as those Christians who are exiles in the regions of Asia, Galatia, Cappadocia and Bithynia.

These folk addressed in the letter are most likely Gentiles who have forsaken their family gods and find themselves on the outside of social, political and family bonds. They are exiles that are suffering, not perhaps physically, but certainly socially and perhaps economically. Being a Christian in such small, isolated towns and villages would have been difficult. In such inland habitations, remote from the major cities and towns on the coast, family and cultural bonds were prized highly in these more conservative societies. As part of a small minority in Roman society Christians would have felt excluded from former ties with family and friends and perhaps even cut off from employment because of their rejection of their pagan roots. So these folk were resident aliens.

If you ever travel to Cappadocia in Eastern Turkey as Gail and I did in 1995 you will discover the caves that Christians dug out of the soft stone of the hills. An entire city can be found in the heart of these hills dug out by human hands. There the Christians found refuge from persecution and these underground towns were lived in right up into the 20th century.

Peter (or missionaries writing in his name) writes from Rome to the Christians who are dispersed throughout this region. They, like many Christians in the middle to end of the 1st century were out of sync with the values and religions of the empire. To these sometimes bewildered, sometimes discouraged, and often fearful Christians, Peter writes this wonderful letter, so full of encouragement and hope.

We Christians living in Canada are hardly persecuted in these ways. But if we have taken our stand in the Gospel we will find ourselves often at odds with the values of our Western way of life.

In one of her sermons collected in the book, **The Preaching Life**, Barbara Brown Taylor contrasts the images Madison Avenue offers with those of the Christian faith.

Modern advertising, she says, offers images of “wealth and dominance, self-sufficiency and physical perfection.” These images are in our faces daily and help shape our self-image. To live the good life, to be truly happy and fulfilled we are persuaded that these are the products that will transform our lives. These are compelling images because they appeal to our deepest hungers for safety, for happiness, for love.

In contrast Scripture and the Christian tradition present images that speaks of a very different road to fulfillment. We are reminded of whom we are through images of Eden, Exodus, Easter, bread and wine, waters of baptism, images that speak of our belonging to God, about being transformed by grace, about our hope for a destiny beyond the confines of this life and world.

Contrasting images to be sure, but what we have to recognize is that both sets of images compete in our lives. We are people who live in the world. We are human beings with profound needs for love, certainly, happiness, and hope. Which set of images seem most persuasive to us? Which set of images shape our lives? Or are we drifting between the two, hoping to find a compromise, a middle road? How can we be sure that the biblical images are any more truthful than Madison Avenue’s? Where are we to find the magic rubbing stone that tells us which is true? And what does our daily battle with post-modernity do to our assurance that our faith is genuine? Or can we have any assurance at all?

Our reading from Peter is one place to turn for some help on these questions. **The first question** this reading raises for me is the identity of the addresses of this letter. Who are the people getting this letter? We are told that they are exiles scattered around Asia Minor. In Roman society it was not a popular choice to become a Christian. Belonging to a house church identified you as a person who had abandoned the values and gods of Rome. These recipients are

perhaps suffering for their faith. Strained relationships within families, in workplaces, in communities, were the inevitable consequence of following Christ's way. Often they would find themselves cut off from family, from their jobs, even from their homes. It would have been tempting to give up on their faith.

Living as we do in a modern, post-Christian society, we too will feel some of the tension. How we raise our kids, how we conduct ourselves at work? For most of us in the West the response to our faith will generally be indifference, or puzzlement, or perhaps even amusement. For others in the world the response can be more deadly and serious.

Because our lives are lived out, as these early Christians were, in a society shaped by different images from those taught by Jesus, it is often easy to find ourselves sliding into doubt, second guessing our faith, our bibles, our church traditions. And we will be especially vulnerable if we are not developing strong roots in faith through regular worship, bible reading and prayer.

The second question raised by this reading from Peter, is the basis of faith? Where do I look for assurance that I am one of Christ's flock and that I am following the voice of the Shepherd? Peter's words ought to clarify this. He says that our faith rests in what God has done in Christ. God is the subject of the entire sentence from verse three through nine. It is God who has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of our hope. Because Christ was resurrected the entire future has been re-imagined for the human family. Those who are reborn are guaranteed a future inheritance that cannot be cancelled.

This is not to say that we never experience doubts or steps backwards in our faith. I remember as if it were yesterday when as a very new Christian I found myself slipping back into the flow of my former life outside church and Christ. For several years I didn't attend church or read my bible. The feeling I remember most was the sense of drifting further and further away from my life of faith. My spiritual life simply dried up. But along came a crisis in my life. With the speed of a bullet my life was turned upside down and I felt lost and alone. Something inside me pointed me back to those spiritual roots and so I

went back to church, back to the bible, back to faith. It was almost as if God was telling me that the Spirit would never give up on me. As an aside, let me say that I never felt really comfortable in that state of unbelief.

Christians are people who have looked outside themselves for salvation. They are people who have trusted the saving work of Christ, not their good works, not their traditions, not their values. If we look to these efforts we are looking in the wrong place. New birth, conversion, is at the very heart of the New Testament and is absolutely essential for our place in Christ's flock.

This is Peter's point here. Our faith rests in God's movement toward us in Jesus Christ. Through faith, or our trust that Jesus has opened a door to reconciliation and peace with God, we have this living hope. It is a hope, regardless of how much we stumble and fall, that can never be lost. But we must keep at it. It doesn't happen automatically. Faith has to be nurtured. Faith has to be built upon. It doesn't survive without feeding. The spiritual life does go through desert times, but, if it is genuine, we find an oasis where life is restored. If we have started out on that journey of faith, trusting in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God will keep us.

How can we be sure of our faith? Surely only by trusting in Christ's work for us. Turn to him. Believe in him. Trust his finished work, his life, death and resurrection. We sometimes sing, "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness." What is your life and hope built on? Which set of images shapes your life, modernity or Scripture? That is the question I leave with you.

Amen