

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Own Your Hope: The Righteousness Factor”
Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:8-25
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He was their darling for a few short moments. For all of those who believed that government had overstepped its bounds, had grown too large, or was simply trying to oppress the little guy, he was their darling. Clive Bundy, the Nevada rancher who had been running his cattle illegally on Federal land, our land, for years threatened to kill agents of the Bureau of Land Management if they tried to take his cattle off of land he did not own. His stand was supported by politicians and pundits across this nation. They trumpeted him as being as heroic as the founding fathers. He was their darling until he said these words, “And I’ve often wondered, are they (meaning African Americans) better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn’t get no more freedom. They got less freedom.” Suddenly many of those who had proclaimed him to be the paragon of freedom backed away as quickly as they could. And regardless of what they thought about his fight with the Bureau of Land Management they could not believe he could say such a thing...that slavery was not all that bad.

It is in the same vein that many of us approach Peter’s words about slavery in our morning’s text. We wonder, how could Peter say such a thing? How could Peter tell slaves that they were to, “Accept the authority of their masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you, if being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.” This seems to make no sense on so many levels. It makes no sense because Jesus came to set people free, not make them slaves. It makes no sense because these words have been used to oppress people of color, of lower social status, of women and anyone else who was relatively powerless. And just as Bundy’s supporters were embarrassed by his remarks, the church is so embarrassed by these words that it does not include them in the list of its official readings, called the lectionary. If I had followed the official reading I would have skipped the verse that mentions slaves. So why did I include it? I did so because without it we cannot understand what Peter is trying to tell us.

In order to understand my point we need to take a quip trip back to the Roman Empire and learn something about slavery in that context. Slavery was ubiquitous in the Roman Empire. Estimates are that in Rome itself, one out of every three persons, was a slave. In the larger Empire, slaves were essential to commerce and agriculture. Slavery was not racial. Slaves came in all races, nationalities and educational levels. Slaves could be teachers and doctors, or day laborers. Romans could even sell themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts. Sometimes owners were kind and benevolent. At other times though, owners could be brutal and cruel. But here is perhaps the most important things we need to remember about slavery. A slave who tried to run away or rebelled against his master, or anyone who advocated such resistance, faced the real possibility that they would be caught and crucified. And the Romans did so because one of the things they feared the most was a slave rebellion. And so anyone even hinting at a general liberation of the slaves was bound for trouble. With that in mind let’s return to Peter’s letter.

Why would Peter say such a thing? He would do so because he was trying to build a basis for owning hope even in the midst of slavery. The early church attracted not only free people but slaves. They came looking for the same hope as those who were free. In this short section of the letter Peter

gives the slaves, or if you will, anyone who is stuck in a situation in life from which they cannot escape, a word of hope.

The first word of hope comes from a choice the slaves could make. They could choose to act as Christ acted in the face of his oppressors. They could choose righteousness. Righteousness here does not mean some sort of spiritual perfection. It means living in imitation of Jesus. Peter writes, "When Jesus was abused he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." In other words, Jesus chose the way of non-violence. He chose the way of suffering rather than the way inflicting suffering. He chose the way of love rather than hate. This is the choice Peter asks the slaves to make. And he does so not only because it reflects the heart of God, but because in making this choice, slaves have the ability to demonstrate that their human owners are not really their masters. Jesus is their master and the slaves will choose to follow him. So, just as Jesus obeyed because he was following God's way, the slaves are to obey not because they are slaves, but because they belong to Jesus. In this there is hope that even though they are owned by a human being, they belong to Christ.

The second offer of hope to those who are slaves or who are stuck in a life situation from which they cannot extract themselves, is to know that they have not been abandoned. Any of us who have ever been stuck in a time and place of pain, not of our making, knows how easy it is to feel as if we are alone. Peter reminds the slaves that they are not alone. He writes, "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have been returned to the shepherd and the guardian of your souls." In slavery, in our dark moments when escape is impossible, they and we are to remember that God has not left us on our own. God has not cast us aside. But instead God is powerfully present drawing us back to God's own self and guarding our essential selves, our souls. In a sense Peter is calling them to reread the 23rd Psalm. For in that Psalm, the writer realizes that even in the most difficult of times, in the shadow of death, we do not have to fear evil, but can rest assured that God is preparing something better for us...even in the midst of our enemies.

In some ways the gift of both the Psalm and Peter's letter is that they both address reality. They address a world in which life is often hard and oppressive. They do not pretend that there is some magic prayer that will make everything better. Instead they make it clear that God is in the midst of tough times and that even in the worst of situations we can choose to be Christ followers confident in the presence of the Living God at our side. In this there is hope even in the darkest of moments.

My challenge to you on this Sunday is this, to ask yourselves how I am choosing the way of Christ even in the most difficult of situations in order that I might own the hope that God offers.