

Easter 6A  
Peace, Seattle  
May 29, 2011 epk  
1 Peter 3:13-16, John 14:15-21

## **WITNESSING TO THE HOPE WITHIN**

**A sentence from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter caught my attention this week. It begins in verse 15:**

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, and do it with gentleness and reverence.” [1 Peter 3:15]

This letter of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, addressed to Christian converts scattered about the cities of the Roman Empire, is not a favorite of mine. Yes, there are gems that can be pulled out and celebrated—much as I did last week with the image of “living stones” built around the cornerstone of Christ.

But a good deal of the voice in this letter, I find, seems to promote a kind of complacency in the face of persecution that I have trouble swallowing.

The letter was written for people feeling the pinch of the Empire’s rising opposition to the newest religion on the block. And though the “go along to get along” undertone makes some sense, I suppose, coming from a writer who believed Christ’s return to judge the world was imminent... STILL I can’t stomach the author’s suggestion in chapter two that enduring mistreatment from the hand of an abusive master is the “Christ-like” thing to do. [1 Peter 2:18-25]

**But today’s verse strikes me entirely differently:**

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, and do it with gentleness and reverence.”

**The focus is on testimony. The focus is on initiative. We owe to any who would ask us, we owe to Christ, a clear articulation for why we are a hope-full rather than hope-less people.**

**And not only that, we are encouraged to share our testimony in such a way that dialog and relationship building are supported.**

**Now I’ll admit, TESTIMONY is not a primary Lutheran category!**

**In a world that’s going all to heck, we Lutherans may be quite ready to place our hope in Christ rather than the myriad other voices clamoring for our allegiance...but to talk about it?**

**To witness to that hope? Heaven forbid!**

Now the odd thing is, the founder of the Lutheran movement, Brother Martin, had no such hesitancy in expressing where his hope was founded. In fact, you could hardly get him to shut up on the subject! And once movable type was invented? Forget it—his published opinions on all manner of things sacred and secular flew off the presses.

**Come to think of it, maybe that’s the issue**—maybe we’ve let Brother Martin do the talking for us rather than seeing the need to speak hope to a hopeless world ourselves. **The problem is**, the hopelessness of our age is not the hopelessness of Brother Martin’s age; and the hopelessness generations hence will not be the hopelessness of the times in which we live.

**New voices**, a variety of them, are needed to speak hope to a world forever teetering on the brink of hopelessness.

So maybe it's time to stop abdicating our responsibility or shuffling it off to Brother Martin or someone else, and instead taking ownership for it ourselves. **How scary is that?!**

**But the truth is, it doesn't have to be that scary. In fact, it doesn't have to be scary at all. Let me tell you why I know that's true...**

Last Tuesday, after returning home from a LISTENING POST gathering, I returned home to find our basement floor drain backed up, spreading grey water all over the floor of the room.

After uttering a few choice words, I phoned Karl and asked: WHO DO I CALL?

Without hesitation he said, "RAPID ROOTER." THEY'RE A SMALL OPERATION WITH A GOOD TRACK RECORD AND THEY'LL DO THE JOB WELL.

So I made the call that night, and a real person answered the phone, and told me CHUCK would be out by 3pm the next afternoon. True to their word, he was...

...In fact, he called me from the road when he thought he might be a few minutes late...and I heard this BROOKLYN ACCENT on the other end of the line and I thought, I LIKE THIS GUY ALREADY.

When Chuck arrived, he went right to work and within an hour, the job was done...**now here's the point.**

**As he was packing things up I came out to his truck because, frankly, I was curious about this 40-something guy. I wanted to know what made him tick.**

He told me he'd grown up in a large extended family in Brooklyn and had several relatives—uncles, grandfather, cousins—who were in this business of cleaning sewer pipes. He'd learned the trade when he was 19 years old and had been working at it steadily for 25 years.

I asked him how it was that he came out to Seattle from New York.

MY MOTHER SAW I WAS RUNNING WITH THE WRONG CROWD, he told me. SHE WAS WORRIED ABOUT ME. I HAD AN UNCLE OUT HERE SO SHE SENT ME OUT TO VISIT HIM.

A TWO-WEEK VISIT TURNED INTO FOUR WEEKS, THEN TWO MONTHS. MY MOTHER SOLD ALL THE STUFF OF MINE SHE COULD SELL AND SHIPPED THE REST OF IT OUT TO ME—AND I'VE BEEN HERE EVER SINCE.

I'M GRATEFUL TO MY MOTHER, he concluded, SHE PROBABLY SAVED MY LIFE.

**That exchange I had with Chuck took all of five minutes or less, but in that brief time I learned a core storyline of his life.**

Now Chuck didn't share a testimony about Jesus. What he shared was one thread from his life story, but it made me feel like I knew him, at least a little bit, and it was as easy as falling off a log for him because he was simply telling the truth about what his journey had been and where it had taken him.

**What we are being asked to do, you and me, in speaking about the hope we have found in the company of Jesus, is NOT to make something up; NOT to develop a well-buttressed argument for why someone else should believe; NOT to memorize verses from Scripture we can trot out as proof texts when needed, BUT SIMPLY to share our experience...share how life in Christ makes a difference for us, how faith in him keeps drawing us back time and again, back to this caring community, back to the font, back to his Table.**

When Jesus shared his final meal with his apprentices, you could feel the anxiety in the room rising. He's telling them he's going to be leaving them and they're peppering him with questions, and feeling quite uncertain about it all.

In the midst of this he tells them: DON'T WORRY—I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED. THE PARACLETE IS COMING—WHOM THE FATHER WILL SEND, AND THIS ONE WILL STAND BESIDE YOU AND WILL REMIND YOU OF ALL I HAVE SAID TO YOU. [Jn. 14:18, 25-26]

**I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED. I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU HOPELESS.**  
That is Jesus' promise to us.

**When the people of Peace Lutheran Church, Joplin, Missouri, meet for worship this morning in the parking lot next to their destroyed church building, I wonder how these words will impact them.**

**Going to their website gives some indication...this is what it says:**

The May 22 tornado that devastated Joplin destroyed the building at Peace Lutheran Church. A number of members also lost their homes and suffered losses. The congregation is working to help rebuild lives and the building. We appreciate your thoughts and prayers during this time of tragedy for our church and city.

Dr. Musimi Kanyoro, a Lutheran woman from Kenyan who served as Secretary General of the World YWCA says this about hope:

To have faith and to hope means to engage hour by hour with life in such a way that our deeds express that which we hope for, while acknowledging the realism of disappointment frustration, anger, brokenness, and even despair. The challenge is always to dare to hope, and in daring to wrestle with all that seeks to deny us hope... Hope is the greatest gift that the church can give to the world." [see Rossing, 2005 Proc. p59]

Whatever our life context may be; whatever the life challenge that confronts us—great or small—we must always be ready to give an accounting for the hope that is in us; hope that is anchored in the one who declares: I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED.

Amen.

Ever faithful God, surround all who suffer both here, in Joplin, and around the world, with your promise that you will not leave them orphaned. Give us the language and the confidence to reach out to them with words of hope and encouragement, and with hands of support and solidarity. Through Christ who is our hope. Amen.