

The Hope in You
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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1 Peter 3:13-22

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

John 14:15-21

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

This past week in our Wednesday Bible study discussion, our study guide led us in discussion about the recent blasphemy charges brought against comedian Stephen Fry in Ireland. He is a known atheist and, when his interviewer asked what he would say to God if he found out at the end of his life that God was real, he had very honest responses concerning his questions about why we suffer. Because he demonstrated anger at God with words like these, "It's perfectly apparent that he is monstrous, utterly monstrous, and

deserves no respect whatsoever... How dare you create a world where there is such misery that's not our fault?"¹ a listener reported him to the authorities. One of our questions for reflection was this: "Blasphemy laws can be viewed as attempts to protect or defend God. Do you think God needs defending or that [God] tasks some individuals with providing for [God's] defense?"² The general consensus around the table was that God does not need our defense, that God is great enough to sustain anger and doubt and even the blame we sometimes send God's way.

When the author of 1 Peter writes, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence," the urging he makes is not to defend God. Apparently the author felt the same way we did around our table in the Oak Room. Pastor Gordon McClellan eloquently explains, "To engage the world and those who would oppress us..., is most fully to defend or reveal our confidence in God. The more able we are to reveal our confidence in God through behavior choices, the more closely we grow to living like Jesus, whose entire life was a picture of living confidently in God."³

When the world is ugly we may be challenged by people who think like Stephen Fry, people who want God to control it all so that no bad happens or so that only "bad" people suffer, people who want us to explain our God. Or it might just be by people who can't name why they are asking for convincing. While I recognize that there's no promise that anything we say will convince anyone of anything, I know that some things are more meaningful than others. In recent engagement with the process of laws, I've come to learn that explaining to someone the general pros or cons of a law is far less compelling than sharing the personal impact of the law. Similarly, simply coming to God's defense in these circumstances, besides not being what God needs, does little for someone who is firmly convinced against God.

¹ <https://www.thewiredword.com/subscriber/5245>

² Ibid.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 486.

What, though, about the recommendation in 1 Peter? “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.” Or what Pastor McClellan describes as defending our confidence in God. Why do you personally have hope in God when there is suffering in the world, when there is or has been suffering in your own life? Around our table on Wednesday, we had decades of life experience upon which we could look back and identify those times when God was working for good in ways we could not see at the time. The subject of a Garth Brooks song came up, a song which ends “Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.”⁴ Maybe your own unanswered prayers are the foundation of the hope in God that is in you.

Or maybe you can name a clear time when you have known or seen the promise of Jesus from our reading from John. Jesus promises that the Spirit of the truth, the Advocate, the one we call Holy Spirit, will be with us forever; Jesus promises not to leave us alone even though he himself has left. Interesting that Emily Dickinson refers to hope as “the thing with feathers”⁵ and we so often depict the Holy Spirit as a bird. Can you pinpoint your hope in God to a time when you sensed so clearly the Holy Spirit with you, or with someone you love? In the end, 1 Peter’s urging isn’t for us to convince someone else.

My own pastor, in one of his sermons that has never left me, talked about a local tragedy and in doing so, he encouraged us to know what we believed about God during terrible things so we weren’t left searching to understand when something terrible happened. If I believe, like he said in that sermon, that God is the first to weep, when children die, when villages are washed away, when people are beaten, then in my own grief and hardship I am less likely to wonder where God is since I’m convinced that God is already weeping with me. When the author of 1 Peter admonishes us to always have ready an account of the hope that is in us, we are the ones who benefit the most. And, maybe in sharing our story, someone else might come to know and trust in the God who gives us hope. So I encourage you today, to make yourselves ready with your own accounts of the hope that is in you, not for the sake of others, not for God’s sake, but for your own, so you are not found uncertain

⁴ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/garthbrooks/unansweredprayers.html>

⁵ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/42889>

in times of need. In doing so our confidence in God brings us closer to living like Jesus. So may it be for us all.

Let us pray: Lord, you have given us hope and so we give you our thanks and pray our lives reflect our confidence in you. Amen.