



November 3, 2019

*Sermon Series: Seeking Stability in a World of Change*

Clinging to a Living Hope  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**1 Peter 1:3-9 NRSV**

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Growing up on the prairie in South Dakota, there was a particular activity that moved me every time I saw it. It often unfolded something like this: a farmer would get sick or injured or even die; he wasn't able to harvest his crops; winter was coming; his family was in peril; a call went out for help; and, in short order, any number of neighbors would show up with their combines to complete the harvest. All things were done decently and in order. The combines would line up in procession in the field - eight, nine, ten in a row. These were farmers that may or may not have always seen eye-to-eye with the one they were helping. But they found a way to set aside their differences and do what needed to be done. It happened time and time again, a ritual written into the fabric of rural communities. In the face of turmoil and trouble, they would take care of each other. Those combines were a witness to it.

Our Bible reading comes from First Peter. It was written to churches facing turmoil and trouble every bit as real as those on the South Dakota prairie. First Peter was a circular letter, addressed to a group of fledgling churches in northeast Asia Minor. We don't much about those churches. The book of Acts says that on the Day of Pentecost, Jews from Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia were among those who heard Peter's sermon.

Perhaps the good news of Jesus was brought back to Asia Minor by Jewish converts who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. In turn, the Jewish Christians reached out to their Gentiles neighbors. And before long there were lots of little churches springing up, primarily in small, rural areas.

Most likely the Apostle Peter did not write this letter – by some estimates he died in Rome in 64 A.D. – but Peter's preaching might have been the inspiration behind it. The churches were filled with newly-baptized Christians. The vast majority were Gentiles. As excited as they were about their newfound faith, they had more than a few questions on how to live that faith.

Thus, the purpose behind the letter. The new converts needed help in knowing how to respond to a culture that was making life difficult for them; they needed help in figuring out what to leave behind from their former way of life; they needed help in how to apply the Christian faith to marriage and family and the workplace. They were seeking stability in a world full of change. One of the first places they looked was the faith community to which they belonged.

Today is All Saints Sunday. On this day we turn to our own faith community, and to the saints who've gone before us in the faith. They've been an important part of our lives. Much like those farmers driving the combines, at their best they were willing to set aside differences and do what needed to be done. Hebrews pictures these saints as a part of "the great cloud of witness." They're cheering us on. The idea is this: "Since we're surrounded by the likes of Abraham and Sarah, Daniel and David, Grampa Jim and Aunt Sally, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

As the letter unfolds, First Peter gives us a blessing. This was a common practice in ancient letters, a blessing or a thanksgiving which lifted up good things that had happened and set the tone for the letter. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* As Peter sees it, this new birth happens in baptism. We are grounded in hope, which is our lifeblood. Hope keeps new believers showing up for worship. It keeps the student hitting the books. It keeps the

patient waiting for the doctor to arrive. Hope fills us with joy. We keep plugging away at worthy tasks even though rewards are small and those who say “thank you” are few. Please know: this hope is not the same as crossing our fingers or whistling in the dark. Rather, it’s grounded in nothing less than the life-changing news of Easter.

According to Peter, we are people clinging to a living hope. We so need what Jesus is offering to be real and true and vital. We stake our lives on it. And, at our best, we share this hope with each other.

Dorothy Marshall was clinging to a living hope. She was also looking for a place to belong. Dorothy was a regular at our Open Table stop in southeast Rochester. She came every week. She was 82-years-old. While she appreciated the burritos, she appreciated even more the welcome she received and the friendships she formed. Dorothy described her Open Table experience like this: “It’s a wonderful place to come. I look forward to it every Thursday. The food is just great. So are the people.”

Dorothy was even more effusive about the prayer shawl she received. Jan Vetter said it “was blue to match her beautiful blue eyes.” Dorothy was very grateful: “This prayer shawl – I can’t say enough about it! I was very surprised to get it. And I love it! It’s with me all day long and when I go to bed at night. And I think God hears my prayers with it. I’m going to keep it with me forever. And it will probably go with me when I leave this world.”

One day in June of 2018, Dorothy left this world. She died in her sleep. She joined the great cloud of witnesses. In a world of turmoil and trouble, she had found a place to belong. She was clinging to hope.

First Peter’s blessing continues: *In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

There were plenty of trials for the newborn Christians in Asia Minor. The trials they faced were not court trials. Nor did they involve state-sponsored persecution. More likely they were facing social rejection from friends and neighbors. Since turning to Jesus, they were looked upon suspiciously – as different, as strangers, as exiles. It’s not easy to leave behind the religion of one’s ancestors and claim a new allegiance, and in this case, a new allegiance to a guy who got strung up on a tree. If their society was anything like ours, I can imagine comments filled with ridicule and scorn. *You believe in whom? You’ve given your life to what?*

Peter calls on believers to regard these trials as temporary, and – here’s a stretch – maybe even good for us. As gold gains purity from the fire that

removes the dross, so faith can be refined by adversity and can emerge from the experience more genuine than before.

Duane Lee was clinging to a living hope. Duane was the life partner of Maxine Sims. He had lung cancer, and more than his share of turmoil and trouble. A few months before, I'd gotten a card from Maxine that read: "In Japan, broken objects are often repaired with gold. The flaw is seen as a unique piece of the object's history, which adds to its beauty."

What intrigued me about the card is that one of Duane's passions was going to mountain streams and panning for gold. When I heard that, I found myself wondering: perhaps Duane wasn't just searching for hidden treasure, but also for a way to repair some of the brokenness in his life. Isn't that something we all long for – for someone to help fix the brokenness, to give us a second chance, to forgive us? Duane faced plenty of trials along the way. Cracks developed, but they got repaired, and they became part of his beauty. Faith and gold go hand in hand. Faith, like gold, must be refined and purified.

Duane died in September. He joined the great cloud of witnesses. In a world of turmoil and trouble, his faith got refined. He was clinging to hope.

First Peter continues the blessing: *Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.* The first-century believers were separated by time and distance from the life and death of Jesus. And yet their faith was no less genuine than that of the twelve disciples who walked with Jesus in the hills of Galilee.

To provide guidance for newborn Christians, Peter describes the church as the family of God. We have to be a little careful here. To say that "ours is a family church" makes it sound all warm and cozy. That can be one step away from exclusive. That is, we're a family if we look alike, sound alike, eat alike, vote alike, socialize alike, and are resistant to diversity. As I see it, a better image for the church, especially the church of today, is an extended family. As an extended family, we have to work at our relationships constantly. There are so many things we might disagree about, so many barriers that can divide us and keep people out.

Gail Holmberg was clinging to a living hope. Gail was a regular at Zumbro. She came into this world early, and tragically the umbilical cord got wrapped around her neck. She was deprived of oxygen and suffered brain injury. Gail was institutionalized from age 7 on, much of the time at state hospitals. She spent the last several years living in a group home in Rochester, run by Bear Creek. Again, she was a regular at worship. And she

had fun here. She smiled and high-fived and clapped and laughed out loud and sometimes answered rhetorical questions asked by the preacher.

A few weeks ago, Gail suffered a major stroke. She never recovered. On a Friday afternoon in October, we had a graveside service for her at Oakwood Cemetery. There were lots of people there. Gail had nine brothers and sisters, and many caregivers too. Afterward we went to Bear Creek for a celebration of her life. During the celebration, three of Gail's roommates stood up and sang her favorite song: "Jesus Loves me." We all joined in:

*Jesus loves me this I know.  
For the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to him belong.  
They are weak but he is strong.*

*Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.*

Gail joined the great cloud of witnesses. In a world of turmoil and trouble, her big family got even bigger, with plenty of room for differences, with all the barriers gone. She was clinging to hope.

These are the saints: Dorothy looking for a place to belong; Duane searching for gold to repair his brokenness; Gail joining an even bigger family. These and so many others have gone before us in the faith. We're going to miss them. But like those farmers riding the combines on the South Dakota prairie, like those young Christians in Asia Minor, we believe we are here to care for each other, to share the hope to which we cling. It's what God's people are meant to do.

In the end it comes down to this:

*Jesus loves me! He will stay  
Close be side me all the way;  
When at last I come to die,  
He will take me home on high.*

*Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.*

Amen.