

Today we carry on in the "new birth" and "living hope" Peter talks about in his first letter. Last week we discussed how the good news and reality of the resurrection of Christ, and the power it is and stands for in our lives, serves to actively change the headline of our life. Because of our faith in Jesus as the risen Lord, our life gains new and exciting meaning with a "living hope" gifted and guaranteed to us. This "living hope" is not just some wishful thinking. Far from it. Jesus created a stamp of 100% guaranteed when he was raised from the dead. Jesus' resurrection and the grace it gifts to each of us in our lives is not conditional on us. Therefore, the good news we celebrate in Christ is that each of us are signed, sealed, and delivered.

How can that be? For believing and faith filled Christians, Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus the Christ is God's gift to us - a bridge, a conduit, a link,- of love and grace that signs us, seals us, and delivers us as God's own. In Christ, as Peter writes, "we are ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." This last part about a lamb is important to note because a lamb without defect or blemish was what God asked to be sacrificed at the Passover. As the early Israelites understood and practiced, the sacrifice of a lamb of this kind was the ultimate of sacrifices to be presented to God. God deserves only the best from us. Why? Because God is the best and only provides the best for us. Lest we remember that Jesus would soon become known as the sacrificial lamb, the only person to be without defect and blemish. Christ was, as Peter declares, "destined before the foundation of the world... for your sake."

In Christ, each of us are signed, sealed, and delivered. The nature of Christ's gift to us is not only individual, as God's love for each of us is as abundant as though there was only one of us, but also communal. Our faith in Christ not only unites each of us with Christ as a gift, but also gifts each of us with being united with one another as brothers and sisters, a kin group. Let's keep this in mind, because our responsibilities to live into our faith then involve more than looking after ourselves, it includes caring for and loving one another.

The beginning of Peter's first letter is clear to define that we are signed, sealed, and delivered in the good news of Christ's blood and resurrection. Now what?

Consider this: The bright light of resurrection did not stay at the tomb. Resurrection could not be contained in that place; any more than the stone could contain Jesus' body. The life-giving light did not stay in one place but spread. And it spread like wildfire from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. The resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus is alive and it moves. And we are alive to do the same thing- spread like wildfire the good news of Christ.

When we take a close look at Peter's words in this letter, we are guided to "Now what?" as he attempts to provide some groundwork for Christian longevity. Peter's letter wasn't only an Easter letter for those living centuries ago, but has been passed down to future generations, to us, in these days after Easter. As we can recall, at the time Peter wrote this letter and addressed it to people in exile, who were searching, longing, and seeking a home. We too, in so many ways beyond geography, are a people in exile, also searching, longing, and seeking our eternal home. Across all of time, God's people have searched for meaning and purpose in life, and Peter works to shed light on that quest. **The life of faith that leads one to God is the key.** This letter from Peter can speak to us and transform us today as much as it spoke to and transformed the first recipients of it.

Peter answers the question, "Now what?", with the following. In verses 3 to 13, on account of the mercy of God, believers are "*to set their hope*" completely on the coming grace. In verses 14-16, on account of the holiness of God, believers are "*to become holy in every aspect of life.*" In verses 17 to 21, on account of God's impartial justice and the liberation effected by Christ's death, believers are "*to live in reverent fear.*" And in verses 22 to 23, on account of their consecration of themselves and their new birth, believers are "*to love one another deeply.*" What Peter is highlighting and drawing attention to is the fruit that Christ's work bears in our lives, our shaping into persons who bear an obedient love for one another just as Christ has loved us.

The verses Camp read a moment ago in Peter's first letter highlight and draw attention to two very specific characteristics of a life lived having been signed, sealed, and delivered by Christ.

Peter writes that on account of God's impartial justice and the liberation effected by Christ's death, believers are "*to live in reverent fear.*" For many people I think, God's impending judgment is itself a motivation for fearful living. This suggests that we are intimidated by God or made anxious by God or have a sense of dread or terror for what God may do if and when we do the wrong things. What do you think? Is God wanting us to feel threatened by God so we will then act obediently? Or is there another way to consider this reverent fear we are to have of God? I think there is another way that is more in line with what Peter is suggesting and what God desires from us.

It is fair to think of reverent fear as a kind of respect. We should respect God's power and authority, not because God's angry with us, but because we desire to please God. Perhaps the best analogy is how parents react to their children. They love each other very much, but if the child misbehaves, the parent will get angry and appropriate discipline is awarded. If the child has learned the lesson, he/she will try harder not to make the same mistake again because of his/her respect — his/her reverential fear — for the parents. Is this how our relationship with God is? I think so, in many ways.

In this way, what we learn about reverent fear is that it greatly impacts the way we live. Believers are not to be scared of God. We have no reason to be scared of God. We have God's promise that nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:38-39). We have God's promise that God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). The fear of God is respecting God, obeying God, submitting to God's discipline, and worshiping God in awe.

Joel Green writes, "Fear to Peter has to do, not with intimidation, anxious dread, or terror, but with the fundamental orientation of one's life toward God, with according the highest value to one's relationship with God, so that it determines all else."

Psalm 111:10 declares, "the reverential fear and worship of the LORD is actually the beginning of wisdom." Want to be wise? Reverently fear the LORD.

And if you are wondering about how much we should fear God, maybe we can consider this quote, "We can't be "a little pregnant" and we can't fear God "a little."

The second major characteristic Peter highlights is that on account of their consecration of themselves and their new birth, believers are "*to love one another deeply.*"

Once upon a time a person was touched by God, and God gave him a priceless gift. This gift was the capacity for love. He was grateful and humble, and he knew what an extraordinary thing had happened to him. He carried it like a jewel, and he walked tall and with purpose. From time to time, he would show this gift to others, and they would smile and admire his jewel. But it seemed that they'd also dirty it up a little. "Now," he thought to himself, "this was no way to treat such a precious thing," so he built a box to protect his jewel. From then on, he decided to show it only to those who would treat it with respect and meet it with reverent love of their own.

Even that didn't work, for some tried to break into the box. So, he built a bigger, stronger box--one that no one could get into--and the man felt good. At last, he was protecting the jewel as it should be. Upon occasion, when he decided that someone had earned the right to see it, he'd show it proudly. But they sometimes refused, or kind of smudged it, or just glanced at it disinterestedly.

Much time went by, and then only once in a while would someone pass by the man, the aging man. To get their attention he would pat his box and say, "I have the loveliest of jewels in here." Once or twice, he opened the box and offered it saying, "Look and see. I want you to." And the passerby would look and look, and look. And then they would back away from the old man, shaking their head.

The man died, and he went to God, and he said, "You gave me a precious gift many years ago, and I've kept it safe, and it is as lovely as the day you gave it to me." And he opened the box and held it out to God. He glanced at it, and in it was a lizard--an ugly, laughing lizard.

Love is indeed a priceless gift given to us by God in the most divine of ways. Love is indeed a jewel to be admired. However, love doesn't belong in a box, left unused and reserved for special occasions, or else it may turn into an ugly, laughing lizard. True love, like that of God's love for us, and the love God calls us to share with one another is a bold love. This true love, or deep love, is sacrificial and costly. It is not always easy, but it is always worth it.

To love deeply, as Peter writes, means to love from the heart with an imperishable love. This love is not perishable or fleeting but is rooted in Christ and unmovable. It accepts even the flaws of another and embodies an effort of quality time spent with another because they are worth your time. To love one another deeply is to have "*genuine mutual love*" for one another as Christ loves us.

Show me a church where there is love, and I will show you a church that is a power in the community. In Chicago a few years ago a little boy attended a Sunday school I know of. When his parents moved to another part of the city the little fellow still attended the same Sunday school, although it meant a long, tiresome walk each way. A friend asked him why he went so far and told him that there were plenty of others just as good nearer his home.

"They may be as good for others, but not for me," was his reply.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because they love a fellow over there," he replied.

(Moody's Anecdotes, pp. 71-72)

The fact that we have been signed, sealed, and delivered by Christ turns us in trust to God, in obedience to the truth, and in love to our neighbor. Being signed, sealed, and delivered frees us to be holy. Yes, I said that right. Being in Christ means we can become holy. Being signed, sealed, and delivered provides us with purpose and belonging. Being signed, sealed, and delivered gives us great responsibility to fulfill God's divine intentions for us. What a calling, right? What an opportunity, right? And to think that God is our boss in this calling.

Let all God's people say... Amen.