



The Trinity Pulpit



A Strange and Wonderful Hope

I Peter 3:13-22

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In his new book, *The Faith*, Charles Colson recounts the chilling story of Charles Carl Roberts the IV. He was the thirty-two year-old milkman who burst into the West Nickel Mines Amish schoolhouse and shattered the innocence and serenity of an Amish community. He carried with him a 12-gauge shotgun and a 9mm handgun. He also had another rifle with over six hundred rounds of ammunition, a stun gun and two knives. He ordered the young girls to line up in front of the chalk board and demanded the teacher take her fifteen male students, a pregnant woman and three mothers outside. Next, he used flex ties to bind the young girls who ranged from age six to thirteen. Roberts seemed to be prepared to take his time with this crime. He called his wife to explain his suicide note and to tell her why he was committing his crime. During this time, the girls began to question him, and those outside had run to contact the police. When asked why he was going to hurt the girls, Roberts responded because he was mad at God. One young girl asked Roberts to let the others go and just keep her. She was ready to make the greatest sacrifice we can make by laying down our lives for our friends. Roberts was not deterred by the love or the courage of the young girls. He reacted and began to shoot the young girls execution style. The police stormed the little school house but it was too late for five of the young girls. He shot all ten, but five survived to tell the story. In the end, Roberts took his own life. It would seem that this is where the story should have ended. It should have been just another story of senseless violence that fills our news each and every day. But the story did not end here. We all know that really as horrible and terrible as this part of the story was, it was only the beginning of this story that would astonish the rest of the nation.

It was what happened next that surprised everyone. This Amish community did not get angry but responded in love. Instead of reacting with anger toward Roberts and his family, the community responded with forgiveness—not only in word, but in deed. The family reached out to the Roberts' family. They invited the family to the funeral of the

girls. They understood grief, and that we are to mourn with those who mourn. And although the Roberts family mourned the man who had committed this horrible act, they still reached out to this family as they mourned the loss of their husband, father and son. When it came time for Roberts' funeral there was the image of the Amish men at the graveyard standing with the Roberts family. As money poured in to care for the medical needs of the young girls who were injured in the shooting, the Amish community took some of that money and set up a fund so that Roberts' children would have money to care for them as they grew up.

These acts of love and forgiveness left our nation speechless, as well as reflective, on what type of people can react this way in the face of such tragedy. New media found it an interesting story, but never could really grasp the deep reality of what had occurred. Even now, three years later as we think about this story, we must admit that such a reaction seems strange and odd. How could this community react this way? The answer of course is simple, but it reflects the depth of God's love and Christian conviction. The answer is they were simply putting to practice all they had confessed to believe as a community. They were prepared to give an answer for the hope they had in Jesus Christ.

In 1st Peter we are instructed to be ready to give an answer for the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Peter suggests that we must be ready to share the reason why we react like we do and why we choose to live the way we do as Christians. We are to be ready to share this hope. What is this strange and wonderful hope we are to share and how can we be prepared to share it?

You and I have a strange and wonderful hope which should inform our thinking, affect our reactions and influence our values. Peter tells us that this hope is the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Peter puts it this way in verse 18, "For Christ died for sins once for all,

the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.” That is our strange and wonderful hope. Our hope and our message is that Jesus died for our sins and for the sins of all people. Our hope is that although we are sinners and our sin separates us from God, we are forgiven by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Peter gives us insight into the cross of Jesus that brings us hope. First we are told that Christ died for sins. Jesus died for sins. Sin in the New Testament is to miss the mark or to rebel against God. Sin is that which separates us from God. Sin is that which is a part of our lives which is displeasing to God. The Bible teaches us that God is holy, and because God is holy he cannot be in relation to imperfection. So, for us to be in relationship with God, there must be a way to rid our lives from the sin that separates us from God. Jesus’ death on the cross is the sacrifice which provides that forgiveness.

We are told that Jesus’ death is once and for all. It was Peter’s way of saying that in one moment and for all time and for all people, Jesus’ death on the cross paid the price for sin. There is nothing more that anyone can do, and there is nothing more that we can do in regards to our sin that Jesus has not done on the cross. His death on the cross was the sacrifice for all time and for all people, once and for all, for the problem of sin.

We are told that Jesus’ death was the righteous for the unrighteous. In other words Jesus who was sinless was the sacrifice for us who are sinners. If it was left to us to solve our sin problem we would surely be lost, but Jesus died for us. He who knew no sin became sin that we might be free from sin by his death on the cross.

We are reconciled to God through the cross. Jesus died to bring us to God. We are told that what stands between us and God is our sinfulness. There is this great chasm between us and God because of our choice to sin and Jesus’ death on the cross and our belief in Jesus bridges that gap. I, however, want to take that a step further. It is more than a bridge, it is as though the cross closes the chasm altogether that we are brought to God.

Peter goes on to say that this act of the cross also gives us the hope of eternity. We are saved not by baptism, nor the removal of dirt from the body, but by the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of the father.



*“What is this
strange and
wonderful hope
we are to share?”*

What does all of this say about the hope we have to offer this world? We can summarize it in two ideas. Our strange and wonderful hope is that we have found forgiveness and salvation through Jesus and the cross, and we believe that Jesus is alive and in heaven and so we live our lives in the light of eternity. When we believe that we have been forgiven not on our own merit but by the love of God, it changes the way we view the failure of others. When we believe in the resurrection

we know that what happens in this world is not the last word.

Go back to the story of those in the Amish community. They were prepared for the terrible moment they endured. They were prepared because they understood forgiveness and they lived their lives with knowledge of eternity. This enabled them to speak and to act in a way that was consistent with that which they had confessed. They were prepared to give an answer for their strange and wonderful hope.

How can we be ready to give and answer for our hope in Christ in the various moments of our lives? Let me suggest two ways to be prepared to give and answer. The first is to make the daily choice to make Jesus Lord of our lives. Peter writes it, “In your hearts, set Christ apart as Lord.” I find this verse very interesting by the way it is written and translated. It does not simply say confess Jesus is Lord. It does not say believe Jesus is Lord. It says in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.

The heart is the center of not only belief, but conviction and action. It is used in the Bible to describe not feelings, but the idea of conviction and values by which one lives his or her life. The instruction is to choose to make Jesus Christ the basis of what we believe, confess and live. We are to set him apart in our hearts. Some translations say, “Make a unique place in your heart for Christ.”

Peter seems to be suggesting that to choose to make Jesus Lord of one’s life is something that takes thought and intention. The setting of this verse is an instruction on how to act in moments of suffering. He is writing to people who might suffer even when they do good. He is telling them not to fear or be frightened by the things that are frightening to others, but instead trust Christ. Set him apart as Lord.

The truth is there are many things that fill our hearts. There are many things that we can make the lord of our lives. There are many things that we use to be the base conviction by which we live. Throughout the Bible we are told to choose, that is make an intentional act, to follow the ways of God. Joshua asks the people of God to choose this day whom they would serve. Jesus tells us that if we are going to be his disciples we must take up our cross daily and follow him. Jesus reminds us of all the things that we chase after in this world. We chase riches, security, and self-reliance. Jesus says it this way: Don't be concerned with what you will eat or drink or wear, for the pagans chase after such things. But we are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Over and over again we are instructed to place Christ as Lord of our lives. Let's admit to ourselves this morning that there are many things that compete for the Lordship of Jesus in our lives. This competition is an everyday competition. Some days it is the things of this world. We envy what others have and we begin to live our faith with materialism as our lord. We are afraid of the future and anxious about the present, so we begin to live our lives with fear as our lord. We desire recognition, so we begin to self promote and soon we are living with the idea that we are the lord of our lives. Now listen, there is nothing wrong with nice things unless their pursuit is keeping you from giving to the work of the kingdom of God and caring for those who are not blessed like you. Having moments of fear and anxiety are not sins, but it becomes sin if this becomes a way of life and keeps you from taking steps of faith that God is calling you to. Being confident in one's abilities and giftedness is not a sin unless we conclude we are so self-reliant we do not need God.

There is daily a choice we must make to be prepared to give and answer for the hope we have in Christ. That choice is to set Christ apart in our hearts. What fills your heart? What daily becomes the chief competitor for your allegiance to Christ? It is important to identify it and be aware of it so that we can intentionally make the choice to set Christ apart as Lord. It is though each day we need to take our holy imagination and view ourselves removing this competitor or that competitor from the throne of our hearts so we might set Christ above all things. This is important because we are instructed to always be ready to give a defense of why we have hope.

We set Christ apart as Lord and we prepare to speak of our hope in Christ. How are we to prepare? What does this preparation look like? First we have already determined that it is intentional and daily because we are going to set Christ apart as Lord. The rest of the

verse might give us insight about this preparation to be ready. Our preparation to share our hope in Christ is a preparation of mind, attitude and spirit.

We are to prepare our minds. We are told to give an answer. The word "answer" actually means to give a reasonable and intelligent response. The Christian is someone who has given his or her faith some thought. We prepare to speak of our hope in Christ by thinking about our faith and forming our thoughts into an intelligible response for why we do what we do and believe what we believe. Our faith, as William Barclay states, needs to be a first person experience and not a second-hand story. We are prepared to speak of the hope of Jesus by thinking about what we believe.

We are prepared by letting the attitude of Jesus be our attitude. We are told that we are to give our defense with gentleness and respect. It is one thing to make an argument for Christ and it is another thing to do so in a way that compels others to follow Christ. We can be prepared intellectually to speak of our hope in Christ, but if our attitude toward others is not the attitude of love and concern for them, then our best argument is lost. We are told to prepare our lives with gentleness and respect for others so that when we speak of the hope we have in Jesus, it can be received.

It is also important to prepare ourselves spiritually. Peter says have a clear conscience. To be prepared to give an answer we must live lives which not only believe the right things and cause us to have the right attitude but, let me suggest, also causes us to act upon the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

He was sitting there by himself in the waiting room when I walked in. I had come to see another person in ICU but they were unavailable. So, I would wait like everyone else in a waiting room. I sat quietly while he stared into space. It did not take a genius to realize that he was deep in thought and filled with

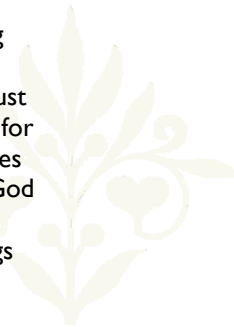
concern for someone. I began the conversation with small talk, and we talked a few moments about nothing really when our conversation turned to who we were here to see. I was here to see a congregation member and he was here waiting on news about his spouse. He told me of her condition, which was very serious, and spoke of the fear of her not surviving. He wept as he spoke of his love for her and his fear of being alone. Finally, he said, "Pastor, would you pray for me? I don't have a pastor and I really want to pray." So we prayed. We prayed for healing and for faith. We prayed for strength and for patience. Most of all, we prayed. We prayed, and I sensed that it had been a long time since he had prayed at all. He would say later, "I just was not ready for this."

*What daily
becomes the chief
competitor for your
allegiance to
Christ?*

In his book, *Just a Walk Across the Room*, Bill Hybels writes about what he describes as Spirit Directed Promptings. These are those moments in life when as a Christian you realize that you are to speak to the stranger next to you; or, stop and help someone in need; or, be present in a moment when someone is hurting. It is the practice of not only being aware of such moments, but acting upon them.

How many times have we had those promptings only to dismiss them? How many times have we thought we ought to call him or her or go by and check on them, but something else quickly gets our attention, or the urgency of another item replaces that thought? I wonder how many times we have missed the blessings of God simply because we were unaware or unresponsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

It seems to me that this is finally what Peter is saying to us. He is reminding us that we have this strange and wonderful hope through Jesus Christ and we must be ready to share it with others. Are you prepared for whatever life might bring? You and I can be. It comes by setting Christ apart as Lord, and by daily letting God prepare us. Think on the things of God. Let God mold your attitude, and learn to trust the promptings of the Holy Spirit that you might be ready to give a reason for the hope you have in Christ Jesus.



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