

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
April 27, 2014
“Own Your Hope: You Don’t Have to Wait”
Psalm 16;1 Peter 1:1-9

When I spoke at my mother’s memorial service I said that she was frugal, to which her sister, my aunt, commented from the second pew, that she was not frugal, she was cheap. Everyone laughed, because we understood my mom, but I will still go with frugal. As a child of the depression who grew up in a family in which her father worked nights for a newspaper, in which there was not a lot of money to go around, she learned frugality. So in my house we learned it as well. We only went out for dinner on very, very special occasion. We wore blue jeans which were always cuffed so we could grow into them. My mother cut my hair as well as that of my brothers. My mother made all of her own clothes. What I learned later in life though was that my mother was not simply frugal because she had grown up that way, but for two other reasons as well. First she wanted to be able to send me and my brothers to college. Second, she wanted her four sons to have, even if small, an inheritance for us to use. Both of these reasons for frugality grew out of her love for us.

I hope you can sense that same kind of love in Peter’s opening words about God and all that God has done and is doing for us. Peter begins his first letter by reminding us that we are God’s family. He does this by using a lot of “churchy” phrases including, “we have been chosen and destined by God; we have been sanctified by the Spirit and we have been sprinkled by the blood of Christ.” All of that is to say that we did not stumble on God but that God came looking for us in order to make us into a part of God’s own forever family. And because we have become part of God’s forever family, we are in line for an inheritance...something that would have been taken for granted in the Roman Empire. As Peter puts it, we have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and into an inheritance of salvation which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept for us in heaven for you. This belief in the salvation which is kept for us by God is one that has given hope and comfort to Christians for almost two-thousand years. It is what gave me hope when I spoke at my mother’s memorial.

Yet, all of this begs a question. What happens if we need that inheritance now? Let me explain. As part of a family, there are moments when members of that family need help. The question becomes will we help them now by sharing what we have, or will we hang on to what we have in order to give them an inheritance later? I know that the vast majority of parents or grandparents have faced that quandary. Our children or grandchildren, often through no fault of their own, find themselves in a tough spot. We have to ask ourselves how much, if at all will we help them. For we know by helping them now, there will be less for them later. In a sense this would appear to be where Peter goes, for Peter is a realist. He understands how difficult it is going to be for Jesus followers to not only remain faithful in an idol worshipping world, but in the face of active persecution. He puts it this way. “In this (meaning our future inheritance) I rejoice, though now, for a littler while you will have to suffer various trials so that the genuineness of your faith, being more precious than gold, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Christ is revealed.” In other words, there will be moments in our lives where our faith may be pushed to the limit. I don’t know about you, but in those moments I would love to be able to tap into some of that promised inheritance; to tap into the blessings of my salvation.

If you have ever felt that way, then you are in luck because Peter tells us that we do not have to wait until the end of our lives to tap into the inheritance that we have been given. I realize that within much of Christianity the salvation focus is on what we will receive after we die. For Peter, it is also what we are receiving right now. We know this because he follows his comments about our faith being proved to be more precious than gold with these words, “Without having seen Jesus you believe in him, and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy because you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” What Peter means is that God is already giving to us, to every member of God’s family, the salvation which is being held for us as an eternal inheritance. In other words, all of the benefits of being part of God’s family; love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness along with a whole lot more are ours. This is why Peter can say that we have been born into a living hope, because we get to experience all that God has to give us right now. We get to live it.

The Psalmist understood this long before the coming of Jesus. The writer of the 16th Psalm is in a place of testing, possibly physical illness. As he lies on his bed he declares that he is part of God’s forever family and that because of that fact he knows that God is at his right hand and that he shall not be moved. He knows that his body will not be moved and that God will not give him up to the place of the dead. Instead God will show him the path of life in the here and now. He writes, “In your presence there is fullness of joy. In your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” This writer knew that God was giving him salvation in the moment.

In 1992 Cindy and I were living in Pampa, Texas. My former congregation in San Antonio wanted me to return and become their senior pastor. I had resisted but finally both Cindy and I believed that God was calling us back there to finish much of what we had begun when I was an associate there. As negotiations were coming to a close, the head of the search committee called and said that the session had changed its mind; that salary listed was more than they were willing to offer. In fact they could not even pay me what I was making in Pampa...which was not a lot. Cindy and I both knew that we could not live on what they were offering. So we said that we could not come. Disappointed I called my parents to let them know the news. Less than a week later a letter from my mother arrived and in it was a check...a very nice check. The note with it said that she did not want anything to stand in the way of us doing what we believed God was calling us to do. My parents didn’t make me have to wait; they shared with me in the moment.

This is what God is doing for us. God is giving us everything we need in this moment so that we can do all that God desires us to do. We are receiving our salvation now. We are already becoming part of the new community of Christ and Kingdom of God. For this reason we can own our hope now...for the now. In the sermons that follow we will examine how we go about owning that hope. For today though, here is my challenge, to ask yourselves, knowing that I am already receiving my salvation, how am I living as a person of hope so that others know that hope can be theirs as well.