

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

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“Own Your Hope: The Trust Factor”

Exodus 32:1; Peter 1:13-23

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He was their last hope. They had seen him on television promising that regardless of their circumstances that God was ready to help them. All they had to do was send in their faith pledge along with a description of their prayer request, and he would pray over those cards and God would fulfill all of their hopes. And so the money came, by the thousands, tens of thousands and the millions. The letters arrived as well with heart rending stories of families losing homes, of children struggling with drug addiction, of jobs lost, of health failing. The people trusted him. After all he was a man of God. After all he was on television so God must have blessed him as well. After all he said that he had gotten blood poisoning from laying so many hours in prayer over their cards and letters. But then the rest of the story came out. Outside of his headquarters were dumpsters filled with the cards and letters people had sent. The money inside was gone, but the notes and pictures remained. Suddenly the trust was gone...and so was the hope. It too was lost.

Hope can only be found where there is trust. If there is no trust then hope cannot grow. To have hope people must believe that there is someone or something out there that can be trusted to offer them a better future; that can offer them a solution to their dilemma; that can save them in their time of need. Without that kind of trust there is no fertile ground for hope. We can see this clearly in our Old Testament text. The Hebrew people had been enslaved for hundreds of years. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had set them free with acts of power and

might. Moses had been God's spokesperson. But now Moses was gone. He had gone up to the mountain and had not returned. Whatever trust they had had in either Moses or God was now gone. And along with it went their hope in a new and better life. Along with it went their hope that they would inherit the land of promise. Their response to this vanished trust was to create a new god; a new god in whom they could trust and thus renew their hope. The golden calf was their attempt to rediscover a hope that had been lost.

The issue of trust lies at the heart of Peter's letter to the church. Peter understood that trust was essential if Jesus' followers were to claim the hope that was theirs. Thus he offers two reasons why Christians of all ages ought to be able to trust in God and thereby own the hope that is ours. First, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter writes, "Through Jesus you have come to trust in God, who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God." Peter's argument goes something like this; by raising Jesus from the dead, God not only fulfilled God's promise to Jesus, that he would be raised on the third day, but God also broke the powers of sin and death. In a sense this means that, as we discussed on Easter, there is a new and better future for us. There is hope that the powers of this world are no longer fully in charge. Instead the Kingdom of God is breaking into this world in a way that offers us new possibilities for life, love and community. We can own our hope because we can trust God.

Second, we can trust God because we have seen the fruits of this new and better world in our own lives. The example that Peter offers is that because of faith in Jesus Christ, because of what Jesus and God have accomplished, they possess genuine, mutual love. "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth (meaning you trusted in God through Jesus Christ to change your life and change the world), so that you have mutual love, you love one another deeply from

the heart.” Peter takes it for granted that the recipients of his letter have been changed for the better. Their being born anew by the work and love of God was not simply something that would get them into heaven, but was something that changed them now; that made them people whose lives demonstrated this new and better future. But it does not stop there Peter writes, it makes it possible for us to love others with the same love with which God in Christ loved us. He wants us to know that we have been made capable of forming this better community and better world. We can trust God, Peter tells us, because of what we see in ourselves...and therefore we can own our hope.

The television preacher asked people to place their hope and trust in him to secure what they needed from God; to trust him so that they could have hope. Peter did not. Peter reminds us that our hope is in God, not in a human being, because God can always be trusted. We human beings...we will always fail one another. So our challenge is not to place our trust in a television preacher, or in me, or in the church or in any other person or institution. As one of my pastor friends always said to his new member classes, “Sooner or later we will disappoint you.” Our trust and hope is always in God, the one who never fails.

My challenge to you then is to ask yourselves, “How am I trusting in God’s life changing presence, in such a way that I can own my hope?”