

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Making the World New: A New Hope
April 19, 2020
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Isaiah 9:1-7; 1 Peter 1:3-9

I want to begin this morning with a quiz. And the quiz has a single question, which is, what do the Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, the Matrix and the original Star Wars trilogy have in common? I'll give you a few seconds to think about that. Those of you on Facebook can send in your responses. I realize that there are probably a number of answers, but, the answer I am looking for, is that they are each based on the archetype of the chosen one; the chosen one who will face off against the great evil, give the people hope and then defeat the forces that oppress the world. Frodo Baggins, is mysteriously chosen by the ring to bring hope to Middle Earth. Luke Skywalker is chosen by the Force to bring order and justice to the universe. Harry Potter is chosen by fate I suppose, to defeat Lord Voldemort. And Neo in the Matrix is seen as the one who was to come. In many ways I believe that this myth is one of the reasons for their popularity because people are always looking for hope; hope in the midst of difficult and trying times.

Lest we think that this myth is something new, it isn't. It is as ancient as our story out of the prophet Isaiah. Let's set the scene then for this text. The nation of Judah was in need of hope. The great Empire of Assyria, an empire as brutal as anything conceived of in works of fiction, was moving across the landscape of the near East. It was destroying and annihilating any nation that stood in its way. For those who surrendered, they were brutally taxed and oppressed. The people of Judah watched helplessly as their neighboring states, though banding together were crushed. Would that be the fate of the people of God? Would that be the fate of those whom God had called and covenanted with? Was there any hope? The answer from Isaiah was no, they were not forgotten and yes, there was hope. There was hope because there was a chosen one whom God had called. Listen again. *"The people who walked in deep darkness have seen a great light...the rod of their oppressor you have broken as on the day of Midian...For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us... his authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace."* The chosen one has been born, so have hope. It was a moment of hope, but ultimately one that proved to be short-lived. Yes, the Assyrians did not conquer Judah then, but Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, allied himself with the Assyrians and worshipped their Gods. Later Judah was conquered and oppressed by Babylon, Greece, Egypt and Rome. Once again then by the time of Jesus and Peter, people were again asking, Is there any hope? When will the chosen one arrive? The answer for Peter and the early church was yes, there is hope and the chosen one is already here.

We can see this response in the opening to Peter's first letter. His language makes it clear that the people can have hope because the chosen one has arrived and has already won the victory over the powers and principalities of the world. Listen again, *"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, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefined and unfading..."* Let's unpack this. First the church, and the world have been born again. I need to be clear at this point that what Peter is talking about is not some individual experience here. Instead he is declaring that the old era has passed away and the new era has begun. This belief in two eras, one of the world and the other of God, is part of Jewish theology. Peter believes that in Jesus being raised from the dead, the old era is gone and the new one has been initiated. Thus we have experienced a new birth. And not only that, but this new era would last forever. It would last forever because unlike the Jewish kingdoms of old, it could not be defeated by force of arms, meaning it is imperishable. It cannot be made unclean like Judah was under Manasseh, meaning it will be undefiled. Finally it will not fade away over time, as did the Kingdom of Judah, meaning it is unfading. In other words this new era is here to stay. Second Peter tells his readers that they have been given a living hope...notice present tense. This is not a hope for something that will happen, but it is a hope that is existing in the present, because Jesus is in the present. Jesus is not a was, Jesus is an is. So Jesus is the hope, the living hope. And this is an amazing declaration. First it is amazing because Peter is saying that this itinerant, apocalyptic,

wonderworking, miracle offering, always forgiving Galilean, named Jesus, is the chosen one of God, and through his death and resurrection a new era, a new creation, has arrived and that this risen Jesus is still present offering hope to the hopeless. But there is a second reason this is an amazing claim, and that is, that nothing appeared to have changed.

What I mean by this is that Rome was still in charge. The minions of Rome still ruled and taxed the people. There was still disease and death and persecution. If Jesus were the chosen one, what had actually changed? How could the church say, yes he is the living hope and there has been a new birth of a new era? And we might ask the same thing. After all, we are only 20 years removed from one of the most brutal centuries in the history of humanity. In the 20th century more than 170 million people were killed either directly or indirectly from war and political oppression. Millions more died from the Spanish flu. Even now, with our amazing technology, we are struggling to defeat a new and deadly virus and all around us we see this time being used as a jumping off point for ancient prejudices and a reemergence of racism of all kinds. Granted, Peter tells his readers that they will have to suffer various trials. He acknowledges that life will still be difficult. Life will come with hard times. Even so, how then can he and we affirm that Jesus is the chosen one of God who is giving us, and the world a new hope and a new birth, into this new era of creation? The answer for Peter comes in our experience of the love and life Christ is giving us.

He begins with these words. *“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now you believe in him and rejoice.”* What Peter is appealing to is our experience of the love of the risen Christ. The essence of his proclamation is that we are not merely following the teachings of a great Jewish rabbi, or remembering a life of someone who loved those around him. Instead Peter calls us to remember that we love Jesus; not the idea of Jesus, or a memory of Jesus, but we love the living Jesus, and by extension, we love the living Jesus because he loves us. The Greek word used here for love is the same word Jesus uses when he tells his disciples to love each other as he loves them. This is a word for love that is used to describe ongoing relationships. And by trusting that Jesus is an is and not a was, we can find our living hope in this love that we receive and give. This is also true of the word for believe, which is not about believing that something is true or false, but it is about making a commitment to something or someone. Here Peter says, because we experience the love of Jesus we can commit ourselves to the one who gives us hope.

The second reason we know Jesus is our hope comes when Peter tells his readers that they are receiving the very life that Jesus has to offer. This is the meaning of that somewhat cryptic verse nine. This is a verse I never understood fully until now, when I think about it in terms of the whole story of the people of God and not just about getting to heaven. It is the verse when Peter says that we are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls. What the modern evangelical world has done with this phrase is to make it a reference to life after death. That we get to go to heaven. This is not what the phrase means. The soul in Greek and in Judaism, is the breath of God that is within us. It is that life-giving essence that God breathed into the first human beings that animated them and allowed them to be those living in the image of God. What happens when we lose hope is that this breath leaves us. We become depleted and struggle to find the life of God within us. The image here is of God doing heart to heart resuscitation on us. Through the living Jesus, the very life of God, the breath of God is being restored in us and we become capable of living as hope-filled people. We are receiving the life of God.

We are living in a time when it would be easy to give up hope; when it would be easy to find ourselves spiritually depleted and run down. When we look at people lining up for food, and maybe we line up for food. When we see hospitals overflowing...and maybe one of our loved ones is in there. When we read of millions applying for unemployment, and maybe we are among them. When we are ready to give up hope, my hope is that you will remember that there is hope because the chosen one is here, and he is not Frodo, or Neo, or Harry or Luke, but he is Jesus, the risen one who is an is, and that in Jesus we are being offered both love and life; love and life that can renew us for our journey in this new age. My challenge to you this morning is this, to spend a few moments each day, in the quiet with the news turned off, and allow yourself to feel, yes feel, the presence of Christ within you. And then allow the love and life to flow.