

The Forgotten Letters of the Bible:

First Peter

1 Peter 1: 3-7

July 26, 2020

North UMC

This week I accompanied my Mother to Weaver and Randolph Funeral Home in Danville. We met with Ron Randolph, the funeral director and my former Sunday School teacher, to plan and pay for Mom's funeral. Here's what she picked out:

- The Westridge poplar casket with the dark stain by Batesville Casket Company
- The vault is a solid marlon lining made by Wilbert Vault Company
- A two-day service with viewing in the evening in Danville at the funeral home and the service the next morning at her home church

What remains to be planned is the service itself. Mom claims that she gave me notes about for the service a long time ago, but I don't recall getting them. I have looked through my filing cabinet and computer but I do not have them. So, yeah, my status in the will is up for grabs!

One of the key things to select when planning your funeral is a scripture passage or two. I highly recommend First Peter chapter one, "By God's great mercy we have been given a new birth to a living hope," because it aptly summarizes the Christian faith. God has given us "a living hope."

What is this "living hope"? How do we get it and what difference does it make?

First, what is the "living hope"? Metaphors abound in Peter's letter because that is the best we can do to describe what we do not know. Peter writes that God has given us "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." This hope is like an inheritance. An inheritance is not something you earn but is a gift and it is a gift you will receive in the future. The inheritance is secured by a will, which is a legal covenant that one day you will receive the inheritance. The metaphor of inheritance signifies that we God's children. We have an intimate and lasting relationship with God. The living hope is like an inheritance.

To ancient Christian ears, it evoked their Jewish roots. The inheritance in the Old Testament was the land. The land was promised to Abraham, and given to the liberated Hebrews. Even though they wandered for forty years in the wilderness before entering the land, it was God's promise to get them there. Every generation after the generation that stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai would receive the land as inheritance.

It was more than real estate. The land was part of the covenant that God made with the Israelite as part of their unique relationship with God. The land defined them as the people of God. The land was their security. As long as they obeyed the covenant requirements, they would have the inheritance of the land. It gave them a sense of belonging to God, a sense of God's protection—literally as sense of place in a hostile world.

How strange that Peter would use such a metaphor for these early Christians whose lives were so precious. The original readers were cut off from their Jewish identity. They were no longer connected to the places of their former Jewish faith—the Temple was gone and the synagogue was no longer open to

them. And they had no place in Roman culture. They did not worship the Roman civic gods and had no place in the civic assemblies. When Peter uses the metaphor of an inheritance of land and they hear it through those ancient ears, it stirred something up. It stirred up their need for identity and security as they faced criticism and opposition.

We too find a sense of identity and security from our land. Think about how we feel about our homes. This is where we find shelter and feel secure. It gives us an identity because we live at that place and in that community. Assurance. Peace. Protection—these feelings are connected with a place. This connection between our feelings and location is clearly seen when these things are missing. When your home is burglarized you feel violated. When a person is homeless they never feel secure and their identity slips away in our society. This is why land was so important to newly freed slaves after the Civil War. It is what makes the forced relocation of Native Americans a great injustice and tragedy. Land is always more than real estate. It is about who you are and whose you are.

Peter is on to something with this metaphor of inherited land. I grew up on inherited land. Upon the death of my great, great grandfather, the farm land was divided into thirds. My great grandfather Walter got one-third on which my grandparents built a house on the south end. Later, they carved out a lot in the middle of it where my parents built a house. I grew up on land owned by my ancestors with my grandparents at the other end of the field, my aunt and uncle around the corner and my great grandmother across the field from them.

Growing up on that land told me who I was and whose I was. I was a part of that family—whether I liked it or not! The geography was a map of the family and I, as the youngest of four generations, knew my place. There was a sense of assurance in that. One a summer evening like last night, we would sometimes end up down at my grandparent's front yard after riding our bikes up and down the road, and sit on lawn chairs just visiting and listening to the cicada and the bullfrogs. As much as I chafed at being the youngest and got out as soon as I could, there was always a sense that there was a place for me there and with them. Peter's metaphor of inherited land expresses these feelings of identity and security that we still today associate with a place called home.

But we all know that places change. The value of inherited land changes. The land I grew up on is gone. While in college, the state rerouted and expanded the highway. They put it right between my grandparent's home and our home. Today, a Wendy's sits where my grandparents once lived and there is a tavern called the Loose Caboose in a strip mall where I grew up.

Unlike the promised land of the old covenant and unlike the inherited land of my family, Peter's living hope is an "imperishable, undefiled and unfading" inheritance. These three words are part of the Old Testament land metaphor. The living hope is like land that we have inherited that is "imperishable," that no invading army can destroy. The living hope is "undefiled" land that is not polluted by an occupying empire. The living hope is like "unfading" land where the flowers never lose their bloom.

To say that it is imperishable tells us that the gift never ends. Unlike our current existence, nothing can destroy our life in the presence of God. Death is not a period on our lives. There is more to it than what we see and feel right now.

To say that it is undefiled tells us that the assurance will not be disrupted. What was left undone in this life will be completed. What was wounded and broken in this life, will be healed.

To say that it is unfading tells us that eternal life will be more fulfilling than life as we now experience it. The gift of everlasting life is the fulfillment of our lives. Eternal life is an ever growing experience of delight.

Peter's inherited land metaphor expresses that God's gift last forever. Human inheritances do not. God's inheritance is "imperishable, undefiled and unfading" because God is eternal—God is "imperishable, undefiled and unfading."

In other words, Heaven is the eternal presence of God. I once heard a eulogy in which the preacher said that heaven was a literal place and based on his calculations from the Book of Revelation, it was approximately the size of Florida with a seventeen foot high wall circling it—heaven, the ultimate gated community! Heaven is not a place but a presence. Heaven is life lived in the presence of the eternal God.

Our eternal life is not a place but it is a "location." We will be eternally "located" in the presence of the everlasting God. The gift of eternal life gives us the assurance and fulfillment we temporarily found or tried to find here on earth. The eternal God gives us our everlasting identity as God's children. The everlasting God gives us eternal security from the forces of death. Eternal life is marked by assurance and fulfillment, delight and rest.

And this gift is for you. It is "an inheritance that is....kept in heaven for you." The "you" is the second person singular. What we believe as Christians—in keeping with other western religions—is that our personhood continues in eternity. The promise of everlasting fulfillment is to each of us. We live in a world where you are just a number, a statistic, a tiny data point in a pandemic. But in the presence of God each one of us is valued by God eternally.

Last November, roughly 145 unmarked graves of African Americans were discovered buried on the grounds of a King High School in Hillsborough County, Florida in the Tampa vicinity. Making the shocking find even more upsetting, it is believed the graves are part of a pauper's burial ground — known as Ridgewood Cemetery — that was used up until the 1950s and sold off despite it being the last resting place to hundreds of people from the local African-American community. The horrors of racism even in how we treat the dead.

Heaven is not like earth. We have a living hope in the living God whose eternal love and justice claims those whom society has discarded, claims and completes their lives with everlasting healing and joy. God knows your name and claims you for eternity.

How do we get this living hope? We get the living hope from the living Lord. We have "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Through the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection makes possible everlasting life for all of us. His resurrection is the source of power that empowers our lives to continue beyond our individual deaths. His resurrection is more than the raising of one lone individual. His resurrection reveals the power of God that overcomes all the forces of death, destruction and evil that kills us. His resurrection is the revelation of God's victory over death for all of us.

Go back to the land metaphor. In every neighborhood there is a substation for the power company that brings electricity to the community. If it goes out, each and every house is out of power—as it happened earlier this week. Christ's resurrection is the substation of God's power that powers our everlasting life.

His resurrection is what makes eternal life a gift from God. I don't create my own power; I am dependent on that substation.

We are dependent upon his resurrection for our eternal life and on no other source of power. We are fond of saying at a memorial service that the departed "live on in the memory of their loved ones." It is a nice sentiment, but it is not a living hope of the Christian faith. Drill down on it and what is being said is that our eternal life is dependent upon the memory of other human beings. It means that eternal life is nothing more than a memory in the mind of another person, and not a gift that "you" receive.

I don't feel comfortable with my eternal existence being dependent upon my loved ones remembering me. Don't get me wrong, I want to be remembered! But I also know that they are unreliable. I mean, they can't remember where they put the car keys last night. Do you think I want to rely upon them to keep my life going beyond the grave?

That is fine as long as you are remembers, but what about an unmarked grave? What about those mass graves throughout the history of human injustice? No. That is truly a dead hope. A living hope is not dependent upon being well thought of or commemorated. It is dependent upon what God has done in raising Jesus Christ from the dead as the universal victory over death for each one of us.

This powerful and everlasting victory makes a difference right now. It is a living hope because it shapes our present lives. The readers of Peter's letter were suffering. We do not know the specifics—whether it was imprisonment and abuse or discrimination and ostracism. But we know that it was for their faith in Christ. And the worst part of suffering is when it is meaningless. The letter was written to help them make sense of their suffering.

Peter says that the suffering is worth it because there is a living hope for everlasting fulfillment in the presence of God. Their faith in Christ was worth it because he was the source of that eternal vindication and liberation. In light of this better future, the suffering served a purpose of refining that faith. God did not cause the suffering, but the suffering would make their faith stronger in God because one day they would overcome it through the power of the resurrection. The hope of heaven gave them inner resolve. The promise of the inheritance gave them the hope they needed to keep on keeping on.

The mark of a living hope is that it helps us persevere. A dead hope leads to resignation.

A living hope is amplified with praise. A dead hope is echoed in complaints. Sometimes I am asked by older adults, "Why am I still alive?" I don't know why. All I know is that while you are waiting, spend your remaining days praising God. Peter wrote that on the day we die we should go out giving Jesus Christ "praise and glory and honor." It is really an act of defiance to be praising God on your deathbed. The doxology is a protest song to the Grim Reaper. So go out singing. Go out shouting "Alleluia."

When I was in my early twenties I worked for Atlanta Urban Ministries. One of my coworkers was another young man my age named Forest. His mother was a United Methodist pastor in the city. Late one summer night he was traveling back to Atlanta. He was on a steep mountain highway and the weather was bad. A semi swerved and hit him head on. He died instantly. At his funeral, his mother asked us to sing "Joy to the World." How strange that sounded at first, but the more we sang the more it sank in that the living hope of the risen Christ is cause for celebration in the midst of our earthly suffering. Let us sing praises to God who gives us a living hope.