

1 Peter 3:13-22  
May 29, 2011

South Plains

Be Prepared!

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.”

At the outset, I thought I was borrowing “Be Prepared” from my old Boy Scout Handbook to sum up 1 Peter 3:15. I quickly discovered that Beprepared.com is FEMA’s website listing the essentials we should have for an emergency. It’s also a song in “The Lion King” and the title of a handbook for expectant fathers. “Be Prepared” could have been Jesus’ motto. In the gospels, Jesus warns his disciples to live in a state of readiness because no one knows when the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night and demand we account for our lives. The verse in First Peter is not a warning, but an encouragement: Be ready to talk sensibly about your hope in the resurrection.

For some of you, that sounds unrealistic. You’ll say, “I don’t have the knowledge or education to talk about my beliefs. Especially if I had to defend the Christian faith, I might say the wrong thing. Isn’t that the preacher’s job?” Well, it is the preacher’s job, but only in the sense they we’re supposed to teach the faith to the church. Once we move the conversation outside the sanctuary, it’s the church, ordinary church members,

plain vanilla Christians who have the best shot at giving a convincing account of our hope in the resurrection. Preachers are paid informants. In the courtroom of public opinion, it’s folks like you who have street cred.

That’s perhaps the most important insight of the Protestant Reformation: the insistence that ordinary lay people can and must understand the Christian hope for themselves. Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, people believed Christianity was true because someone told them they had to believe it. If that was ever the case, it’s not so today. People want to study for themselves, think for themselves, and decide for themselves. And, the best tool to put in their hands for deciding about Jesus Christ is the Bible.

The production of the King James Version of our scriptures and its acceptance by so much of the western world has been the single most important tool for the health and strength of the Protestant churches in modern times. The King James Version is 400 years old in 2011 which means that its life has coincided with the modern era for English speaking people. It’s no longer the most accurate translation or the easiest to understand. Nonetheless, it remains not only the most influential translation of the Bible, but also the single most influential book in shaping the English language – our vocabulary, our common idioms, and especially the way we think about our Christian faith.

In tribute to the KJV, I'd like to think with you today about the ways in which the scriptures make it possible for us to account for the hope that is in us.

Talking about hope means we are placing a bet, facing the risk of losing something critical to our lives, and yet believing we will win that bet. When the stakes are high, I like to keep things simple. On the mission trip to Southwest Virginia last year, our trip leader Jay Sanderford summed up our mission in three words. He said we are repairing houses with the goal of keeping people warm, dry and safe. So, that's my outline. God's mission with Jesus Christ is to keep us physically and spiritually warm, dry and safe.

The gospels tell the story of a warm human being who brought the light of God's presence down to earth. "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they (Matthew 6:26)?" God will take care of us. The parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son are human stories that encourage our best instincts, and tell us clearly that God is a forgiving, heavenly Father. They are stories from the Bible.

I am a theologian by training. I love the doctrines and creeds of the church. I believe it's important for Christians to engage the abstractions of philosophy, the ideas of culture, the sophistication of art and the ideals of society. That's exactly what St. Paul was doing in his

sermon to the elite of Athens. Notice, however, that when he had grabbed their attention with his reference "to the unknown god," he moved to the story of "that man...raised from the dead (Acts 17:31)." Christian hope is wrapped in a human life, not an idea or a doctrine. It is the life of a man who loved and cried and died a very human death before God raised him to new life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "It is not by his omnipotence that Christ can help us, but by his weakness and suffering." That is the warmth of our hope. Scripture warms our hearts.

My Aunt Phoebe raised chickens in an old hen house that was dark and smelly and totally without charm. But it was dry; and that virtue along with their feathers kept the chickens healthy. If you have ever seen a wet chicken, you know the meaning of the expression "mad as a wet hen." God promises to keep us dry in the sense that God heals us from physical ills and emotional distress. That is not a guarantee that we will never get sick. It is a promise that God can heal all the madness of life whether it is an issue of blood, a self-destructive evil spirit, or the fear of death.

My colleague Phil Leftwich told me about driving back to West Virginia to bury an 89 year old friend, a story about someone God kept dry. When he first met this woman, she and her husband were trapped in a pattern of heavy drinking. Cab drivers were regularly called to deliver liquor to their front door. But, in the late 1970's the husband died and the wife entered a treatment program. She came out sober; and for the

next 12 years she was the glue holding her family together and a productive citizen of Beckley, W.Va. Phil was happy to lead her joyful funeral service. "Imagine," he said to me, "that the most productive years of your life might come between the ages of 76 and 89." God never gives up on us! God can keep us dry.

And, God keeps us safe. That's the ultimate hope. Scripture bolsters our hope by reminding us how many times God has saved his people by the skin of our teeth. After all, we are the apple of his eye, the salt of the earth. Even when we are prodigal, God welcomes us back by killing the fatted calf. When trouble strikes, he tells us to gird up our loins and fight the good fight. (Those are just a sample of the vivid expressions embedded in our language and grafted to our faith by the King James Bible)

In order to give a fair account of the hope that is within us, we have to face the fact that the resurrection, our anchor in the future, is not an easy hope to grasp today. It's not popular to be "other worldly," if it ever was. To borrow another phrase from the King James, "eat, drink and be merry" sums up the attitude of many people around us. After all, you only go around once (and that last aphorism is not from scripture).

But, that's exactly the point of Christian faith. Because we only have one life, we need to live it right. Again, it is the example of Jesus that demonstrates the value of a life well-lived with integrity and the worth of

sacrifice. Superficially, sacrifice and safety seem to contradict each other. But, that is true only if we are so self-centered that no one else's welfare matters as much as our own safety. In other words, if self-interest, taking care of number one is our only good, then sacrifice and all suffering is worthless. We know they are not worthless.

When John McCain was shot down over North Vietnam and held prisoner for years in the Hanoi Hilton, he was repeatedly tortured in the hope that the Vietnamese would get both intelligence and the propaganda value of breaking an American soldier. They succeeded in breaking his arms and his teeth and his jaw, but not his spirit. He was neither warm, nor dry, nor safe. Yet, he held out for the sake of his fellow Americans. His love for his family, his country, his fellow prisoners and God made the sacrifice worthwhile. In the most profound sense, McCain was indeed kept safe. We give thanks this Memorial Day for the sacrifices of so many for our benefit.

The letter called First Peter was written to Christians living with the constant threat of persecution and suffering. In the verse just before the one printed in the bulletin, it says in the King James, "If ye suffer for righteousness sake, happy are ye." If that's a little obscure, listen to the New Revised. "Even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not...be intimidated (3:14)." Be Prepared.

We can be prepared for any emergency, any adventure life brings our way, even any suffering, when we have learned the truths and made the stories of scripture our own so we can give a good account of our faith and our hope.