

Keep Your Fork
1 Peter 1:3-9

Rev. Tracey Davenport
April 13, 2008

There are many reasons not to have hope for the future. There is enormous suffering in our world: hunger, pollution, crime, illness, war, poverty, grief, fear, anxiety and death. There are children all over the world suffering because of natural disaster, corrupt government, evil schemes, or the cycle of poverty, seemingly impossible to break. These problems are so huge we don't know where to start to fix them. American Idol raised millions of dollars this week to help, but they did so last year as well, and the problems are still here and growing.

Is it crazy to have hope for the future? Did Peter know what he was writing when he wrote, "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." Is Peter delusional? Why does he have so much hope? Think with me today about Christian hope.

Christian hope recognizes that suffering is part of earthly life.

Peter's hope does not deny the hardship or suffering of anyone. The recipients of the letter of 1st Peter were Jewish Christian exiles living in Roman cities, subject to isolation, harassment, and persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Peter admits they are suffering various trials. None of these to whom he is writing knew Jesus on this earth. None witnessed his death, resurrection, or ascension. But they know the story of Jesus and they love him. They believe in him and so are willing to count and pay the cost of faith in Jesus in the culture in which they live.

Suffering is not unique to first and second century Christians. Suffering hits us all, regardless of faith, gender, age, education, or socioeconomic status. Cancer doesn't care who you are. It finds one in four of us. Christianity in the U.S. has either told those who are suffering that it is their own fault, if they just had enough faith, nothing bad would happen or we have thrown up our hands in despair and thought there is nothing we can do.

Christianity in the U.S. in the past 70 years has also unfortunately turned inward. We have ignored the plight of the persecuted and poor in our world and built massive structures, becoming more like country clubs or gyms than churches. Some churches produce spectacular Christmas extravaganzas, while just a few miles away from their 10,000 seat auditorium, a child goes without any Christmas at all. We have made sure

we had enough, and as neighborhoods deteriorated around us, done little to intervene. This happened I believe because we lost our hope for what is to come, for a future with God, for the world that God loves.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “Hope means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking . . . It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find tht the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective at [helping this world].” I think Lewis is right. If we lose our hope, we will do little to help the suffering in our own world. But if our hope is strong, we will work towards it. Christains must acknowledge the present suffering and therefore work toward a promising future with hope.

Christian hope is based on the resurrection and promises given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. “Hope in a secular sense means a strong desire for something which is possible but may not be certain. The hope of which we speak is something of which we are sure, for which we wait patiently but expectantly. Our hope for the future is based in what we know of God through what he has done. Our hope is not the projection of desires upon an unknown future, but the product of God’s acts in history, above all in raising Jesus Christ from the dead.”ⁱ Our hope is living and active; its fulfillment is waiting for the right time to be revealed. Jesus has overcome the powers of sin, evil and death. We have been given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of God’s promises to us for the future.

God is the only sure thing in which we can hope. Scripture has warned us and life eventually teaches us that to hope in wealth, possessions, popularity, governments, or even in our own religious practice is futile. The things of this world easily come and just as easily go. To hope in ourselves and our own abilities, although we humans have accomplished amazing things, is to hope in fragile creatures with limited knowledge, limited by time and space, and tempted to follow selfish desires. But if our hope is in the Lord, our hope is in the One Eternal God, maker of heaven and earth, for whom nothing is impossible. Our hope is in One who loves us more than we can comprehend. Isn’t it foolish to hope in anything less?

Christian hope recognizes both what we have in abundance now and what we have to look forward to. One of Erma Bombeck's favorite stories is about “The grandmother who took her grandson to the beach one day, complete with bucket, shovel and sun hat. The grandmother dozed off and as she slept, a large wave dragged the child out to sea. The grandmother

awoke and was devastated. She fell to the ground on her knees and prayed, 'God, if you save my grandchild, I promise I'll make it up to you. I'll join whatever club you want me to. I'll volunteer at the hospital, give to the poor and do anything that makes you happy.'

"Suddenly, a huge wave tossed her grandson on the beach at her feet. She noticed color in his cheeks and his eyes were bright. He was alive. As she stood up, however, she seemed to be upset. She put her hands on her hips, looked skyward, and said sharply, 'He had a hat, you know.'"ⁱⁱ

Do we realize what an abundance we have now? One wouldn't know it to read the papers or hear the news. I received an email last week reminding me of the abundance in which we live. Be thankful you pay taxes, it said, for that means you are employed. Be grateful your clothes are too snug this Spring, because it means we had enough to eat all winter. Rejoice in finding a parking spot at the very back corner of the lot because it means you have transportation and are not eligible for a handicapped space. Thank the Lord for the person beside you in church who sings off key, because it means you can hear. Say a prayer of thanksgiving when your alarm goes off at 5am because it means you are alive. Our abundance is not only in earthy things, but in spiritual blessings as well. Grace, mercy and peace are continually poured out upon us from the Father of love.

Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, talks about the "myth of scarcity." He sees it all throughout the Old Testament. Israel had enough in the wilderness. But the people are frequently fearful that there will not be enough. Brueggemann sees Americans functioning in the world today much the same way. We, the richest people of the world, are the main coveters. "We never feel that we have enough," says Brueggemann. "We have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Our belief in the myth scarcity is a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly."ⁱⁱⁱ It pulls hope out of us. Jesus promised us abundant life. Does that mean fancy cars, big houses, and lots of money, or does it perhaps mean something more and completely different?

Even when we do realize how we are blessed now, something more wonderful awaits us. No eye has seen, nor ear heard, not mind conceived what God has planned for those who love him. There is a story of a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer, and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what Scriptures she would like read and what she wanted to be

wearing. The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order, and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly. "What's that?" came the pastor's reply. "This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say. "That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked. "Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor. The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn't going to Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie: something delicious, something with substance. So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'Something better is coming, so keep your fork, too.'" The pastor's eyes were filled with tears as he hugged the woman goodbye. He knew this woman had a wonderful grasp of heaven. She knew that something even better was coming.

The church should be in the hope business. We of all people ought to be known most for our hope because our hope sees and helps the world in all its difficulty, because our hope is founded on something deeper than human ability or wishful thinking. Our hope is built, as Martin Luther King, Jr. asserted, on the conviction that another reality, another Kingdom, already exists, inaugurated by and in and through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was crucified, dead, and buried and on the third day rose again. Our hope believes that because of Jesus, we are blessed now but something even better awaits us. The word of Scripture to those early Christians and to us today is: Keep your fork! Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we all be filled with living hope.

ⁱ "Christ: The Hope of the World," report of the Advisory Commission, Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1954), in *The Christian Hope and the Task of the Church*.

ⁱⁱ Erma Bombeck, *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise: Children Surviving Cancer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 56-57

ⁱⁱⁱ religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533. Retrieved December 6, 2006.