

## **“Are You Ready to be Audited?”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

4-30-17

Based upon Hebrews 6:13-20; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; 3:13-17

They say that the only two things that are certain in life are death and taxes. As Christians we know that this is not true. Through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we can be certain of many other things including, but not limited to, God’s love and mercy, God’s sustaining presence, and God’s power to bring new life in this world and provide eternal life in the next. We celebrated these truths on Easter Sunday and continue to celebrate them now in this Easter season. But up until Easter, we did spend a lot of time thinking about Christ’s death and taxes. We always do during Lent. One of the challenges which comes from living in the world, while striving not to be “of the world,” is that tax season always coincides with Lent. So right when we are supposed to be focusing on God more than anything, the world is telling us to focus on money or else. Another challenge, at least for pastors, is that clergy are audited more than most people. The reason for this is that many (but not all) clergy give more to charity than others in their income bracket. This makes the IRS suspicious. Why would people who earn such modest salaries be so generous? The IRS doesn’t understand about the joys and rewards of tithing. In any case, as a result, my seminary warns all its graduates: be prepared to be audited at any time. I have carried that warning with me for the last 18 or so years. But it wasn’t until this week that I realized that it was actually a theological charge, not just a tax tip. As we just heard, the author of *First Peter* shared much the same warning with the early Christians to whom he wrote, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” That means that now that both April 15<sup>th</sup> and Easter have passed, we are in auditing season in more ways than one.

“Account for your hope,” Peter says, suggesting that he knew that the reason Christians are hopeful would be just as inexplicable to the people who suffered under Roman oppression in his day, as Christian generosity is to the IRS today. “People are going to challenge you,” he said. “They are going to accuse you of being delusional, naïve or worse given the amount of suffering that you and we all are experiencing. So be prepared to account for your hope.” His word choice is really thought-provoking, I think. We have all heard about and probably experienced many different forms of evangelism. We tend to think about evangelism as witnessing, teaching, or proselytizing. But accounting? I would hazard a guess that most of us do not think of evangelism in terms of accounting for our hope.

Now it is pretty clear from the first part of today’s lesson, from Chapter One in *First Peter*, that the author understood Christian hope to be something that comes with faith in the Resurrection. So he may have been suggesting simply that his audience needed to be prepared to explain the reason why they believe in the truth of the Resurrection. I already did that on Easter. But I think that the unusual accounting language in this text invites us to do more than prepare an elevator speech about the empty tomb. The accounting language also invites us to think about our faith and our lives differently. It invites us to undertake spiritual audits of our lives in order to

take stock of the hope within them.

We know that our hope comes from the Resurrection, or at least that it is supposed to, but where is that hope evident in the way that you live? Have you ever thought about that? How do you approach your relationships, your work, your finances, your health, and everything else in hopeful ways? If an outsider were to sit down and go through your books, so to speak, could you provide evidence that your emotional and spiritual accounts are full of hope, or provide receipts which demonstrate that you have been a good steward of the hope God has given us all through Christ's Resurrection? Do you think that people think of you as a hope-filled person, or as an anxious, depressed, or pessimistic person?

It's a question we should ask ourselves often for at least a couple of reasons. The first reason is that we are living in a time when many people who do not otherwise have a clinical reason for feeling down, feel increasingly hopeless about their lives or the future. Our reasons are not quite the same as the people's reasons in Peter's day. Most of us have the luxury of being worried about changes in policies and practices that do not affect us immediately and personally. The people in Peter's day were worried about being personally attacked for their faith. But the results are the same. Many of us are increasingly dwelling on our fear or frustration more than our hope, and if you are among them, I am not here to judge you. I find it a challenging time too. But what today's lessons teach us that when we are feeling this way, it is a sign that we are not balancing our books in a Christian way. Christianity affirms that no matter what is going on in the world or in our lives, the challenges do not change the fact that all things are possible with God. No matter how much suffering we are experience, that suffering cannot destroy God's promise to be with us and lead us into new life. No matter how many reasons you can itemize for feeling hurt, anxious, or afraid, your faith should allow you to itemize more reasons to hope. So if your audit shows that you can't do that right now, then it's time to change your habits as well as your bookkeeping.

It is easier for most people to start with changing the bookkeeping, than it is the habits, and one of the best ways to change your bookkeeping is to train yourself to examine your life through the lens of Christian hope. This can be done by using a psychological tool called "reframing." When we "reframe" our lives, we look at the events we experience and the dominant narratives which run through our heads all the time from a different perspective. It is sort of like putting a new "spin" on your life, but it is one which is substantive, not simply PR, because the new narratives we form are always grounded in fact and faith.

You start by identifying the negative scripts which magnify your fears and your suffering. For example, if a person is feeling low on hope because of experiencing numerous health crises or physical problems, his or her dominant, hope-challenged narrative might be that they are physically fragile, or that he or she should be afraid because something will inevitably go wrong. But a reframed, more hopeful narrative would say, "Look at the history of your life. Despite having experienced this illness and that accident, these infirmities and those physical challenges, you have continued to move forward, overcoming the obstacles as you encountered them. Your

life tells the story of a very strong person, not a very fragile one. It tells the story of someone with resilience, faith, and courage to begin again and again. That tells you that God has been at work in you. You can be assured that God will be with you now and in the future so there is no need to be afraid.”

If you are feeling grim about your future because of your job, or because your retirement income is not what you had hoped, reframing can enable you to find the courage to change jobs or make lifestyle changes that you had not originally planned to make to address your circumstances. If you are feeling discouraged about your relationships, reframing can enable you to rediscover the strengths upon which the relationship was originally grounded, to move forward grateful for the lessons learned, or to reaffirm your personal value and worthiness to be loved. The idea is not to deny the challenges or pretend your suffering is not real. The idea is to enable you to see that those things do not have to define your existence or destroy your future with hope. There is always hope for a new beginning with God. There is always joy and wonder and love and grace in the world because of God. We just sometimes lose our ability to see it. Reframing is a method which teaches us to see the reasons for hope that we overlook when we are too busy auditing our fears.

In his book, Head First: The Biology of Hope and the Healing Power of the Human Spirit, author Norman Cousins recounts how a doctor named William Buchholz discovered the power of reframing at a meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. He was eating breakfast and overheard two oncologists talking about the papers they were going to present later that day. One was complaining bitterly: “You know, Bob, I just don’t understand it. We used the same drugs, the same dosage, the same schedule, and the same entry criteria. Yet I got a 22 percent response rate and you got a 74 percent. That’s unheard of for metastatic lung cancer. How do you do it?” “We’re both using Etoposide, Platinol, Oncovin, and hydroxyurea,” his colleague responded. “But you call yours EPOH. I tell my patients that I am giving them HOPE. Sure, I tell them that it is experimental, and we go over the long list of side effects together. But I emphasize that we have a chance....”<sup>1</sup>

Reframing works with the power of positive thinking, which is very trendy these days. But what distinguishes Christian reframing from pop-psychology positive thinking is that our real reason for hope comes from God, not our own minds. So when we audit our lives, we must never stop with what we know of ourselves. We must also consider what we know of God. We know that our God has the power to make us feel whole no matter what the circumstances. We know that our God has the power to bring new life from the ashes of grief and despair. We know that in our own lives, God is always with us. So in accounting terms, no matter how depleted our reserves become, we still have a special income stream of grace from God which we can use to sustain us through anything. And if our suffering comes from worrying about the world, rather than ourselves, then we know, thanks to the empty tomb, that God is not done with our world yet.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cousins, Norman, The Biology of Hope and the Healing Power of the Human Spirit (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 99.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann accounted for the transforming power of Christian hope this way. He said that the hope we gain from our knowledge of God in the risen Christ “helps us to survive the disappointments and devastations in our lives, literally to sur-vive– to live above them. *Dum spiro, spero*– as long as I breathe I hope, says another proverb. The breath of my soul is hope for life, the fulfilled life. As long as I breathe I hope and the reverse is equally true: as long as I hope, I breathe in and breathe out these powers and energies for living.”<sup>2</sup> That’s a powerful mantra which evokes some of the poetry of the *Hebrews* lesson for today as well. “The breath of my soul is hope.” “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”

What is the anchor of your soul these days? If it is not the hope we gain from the risen Christ then it’s time to change anchors. But if it is, then think about how you account for your hope for others. Where do you think others see most the hope in you? Perhaps it is in your resilience or your eagerness to try new things. Perhaps it is in the kindness you show to all people or the welcome you extend to strangers or in the way you forgive those who hurt you and do the work to rebuild your relationships? Maybe they feel your hope in the way that you speak about the future or the way that you still notice the wonders of the present. If you don’t know, ask someone who knows you well. You might also think about where you see hope in others because they may be able to help you become a good evangelist with their example. You see in the end, evangelism is not so much about sharing doctrines with others, as it is about sharing hope and love. We can all do this. And we all need to do this. In the word of a poem called *Message from the Starcatcher*:<sup>3</sup>

Do you know what hope is?  
It’s not in a prescription.  
It punctuates our laughter.  
It simmers under sorrows.  
Do you know what hope is?  
It’s dreaming of tomorrow.  
It’s pushing past impossible.  
It’s questioning the answer.  
It’s rumors of a break.  
A roller coaster ride.  
Do you know what hope is?  
It’s perfume for the spirit.  
Take my hand...come...  
It’s magic and it’s free.  
It’s not in an IV.  
It sparkles in our tears.  
It dissipates our fears.  
It’s reaching past today.  
It’s trying a new way.

---

<sup>2</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen, *In the End–The Beginning: the life of hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Author unknown. For the full poem, see <http://home.iprimus.com.au/kuekids/hope/poems/message.html>

It's pounding on the door.  
It's always seeking more.  
It's whispers of a cure.  
Of remedies, unsure.  
It's candy for the soul.  
To share it makes you whole.  
Let's share this hope...together...

May our hearts and minds be so grounded in the risen Christ, that we can not only survive our suffering, but also share our hope, for the glory of the God who gives us every reason to hope, and the sake of the future of our world. Amen