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A Mission for the Church

1. Where Is Our Hope?

1 Peter 1:1-4, 13-16 NRSV Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance. 3 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, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.... 13 Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. 14 Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. 15 Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; 16 for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

It's those **little** words that are sometimes the most freighted..... Does anybody here remember that line from Jr. High School days, delivered by the person that you had so hoped might be a girlfriend or a boyfriend: "*You know I really like you, but I **just** want to be friends.*" Oh, that little word "*just*"! Or consider one of those arguments, whether trivial or terrible, in a relationship that begins "*Honey I love you, **but**.....*" Ooh, little word; dangerous ground! As a child, I knew I was in trouble when I was summoned with a sentence that began, in that low and growly and tight tone of voice that I knew portended no good, "**Son**....."

First Peter does it to us too: Did you hear it in our scripture? There is *first* that **wonderful** description of the gospel, of what God has done for you and me and the whole world: "*By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope... into an*

inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading...” How grand and glorious and soaring. But then comes the little word: **“Therefore....”** But this sort of thing happens a lot in scripture. In fact in our scripture for this morning we find the two-stage structure of so many of the Bible’s teachings: Description and then exhortation. **“This is what God has done,” therefore, “this is what you should do.”** Examples abound: At the open tomb: *“He is not here!”* But then comes the second part: *“Therefore, ‘Go – and tell’ the others* (Mark 16:6-7). Or how about that story that begins the Bible where God’s creation of the world is described, and then God says (“little word” alert!) **“But....while you may eat freely you may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”** (cf. Genesis 2:15-17). And, as I say, this morning’s scripture also has this very same structure of description and exhortation; did you hear it? *“By [God’s] great mercy he has given us a new birth....”* But there’s that second part – what God wants of us in turn. And there are two things that stand out in those expectations that God has of us, the content of what follows that “therefore”: we are to prepare our minds for action and we are to set **all** of our hope on Christ.

Now, there are other things that God wants and expects of us, but I want to focus on just those two this morning. But if we did move through the whole list, you might be struck, as I was, by what is **not** on Peter’s list. First, everything on the list of expectations that God has of us are verbs; they are actions. Which means that there is *nothing* on Peter’s list about having the exactly right **beliefs**. There is *nothing* about making sure that those with whom you associate have exactly the right beliefs. Now, goodness knows, I am in favor of thoughtful and morally credible theological thinking.

For too often, under the onslaught of a culture that politicizes, individualizes, and makes shallow everything it touches, too many have opted, in the words of one writer, “for an individualistic, self-centered approach to spirituality that ignores the community-centered nature of the gospel and treats faith as a self-help manual to prosperity and success.”¹ And indeed, reading **solid** things, thinking **deeply** *in the company of others*, and seeking to use our minds to paint the best picture of God is the only antidote for such sloppy or self-centered thinking.

And yet it is nonetheless true that **nowhere** on Peter’s list of things that God wants from us is to make sure that those whom we associate are “conservative” enough, or “liberal” enough, or have the “right” belief on some theological or cultural litmus test issue. No, Peter’s curious phrase about what God wants of us is that we are to “*prepare our minds for action.*” The phrase literally means to “gird up the loins of our minds for running,” and its reference is to New Testament times when if you were wearing a robe and wanted to run, you had better hike up your robe and cinch it tight or else you’d fall over. Gird up the loins of your mind for running, for **action**, for running. And, indeed, my friends, as we come together on this fall kickoff Sunday, as we remind ourselves of what we need to do and to be in order to truly be a “missional church,” ***it indeed is time to run.*** Why? Well, sauntering and strolling is appropriate for museums. But *running* is what is required for the urgency of an emergency room. And surely we don’t want to be museum-churches in an emergency room world. When the World Trade Center attacks occurred, or the Black Forest or Waldo Canyon fires

¹Sara Coven Juengst, *On the Road Again* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p.32.

happened, one of the things that I was most struck by was the number of people that sought to help – sometimes at real risk to themselves. And none of those who were helped ever first asked that responder: “*Wait a minute – What’s your position on abortion or homosexuality?*” And not a one of those who helped another person in those doomed towers or who helped someone sift through the rubble of their homes first stopped to check out whether the person he or she was helping had the “correct” views on whether churches should be singing more hymns and fewer praise songs.

Now again, please don’t misunderstand: I use these dramatic examples not to say that our beliefs about God and world and humanity and church are unimportant. Our beliefs ARE important and we had better try to think well together so as to avoid the tendency to over-simple slogan-slinging in the face of complex issues that demand our best. Nonetheless, St. Peter’s point is also on-target: for in a world where so few have so much and so many have so little, it is a luxury NOT to hike up our robes and RUN to do the work of justice – even if we don’t always exactly agree with everything that our fellow runners think. The point is that in a world where one out of five children go to bed hungry at night, walking at a museum’s pace in a world of hurt with minds in low gear is an affront and a tragedy. The point is that in a nation where every 100 minutes a child under the age of 15 is killed with a handgun,² it is a moral imperative that we hike up our robes and run to deal thoughtfully with this urgent public health menace. The point is that in a culture where child pornographers now enjoy the greatest financial success of anytime in history we cannot afford not to run when so many of the “least of

²Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles www.psrla.org/gunviolence.htm

these” are menaced by such mendacity.

And the point is that our fellow runners will always have some beliefs that we don't like and don't agree with, but to use such disagreements as an excuse **not** to do those things we **can** agree on, is an affront and an offense to the God who has made us for one another, who has gathered us about a Table that unites us far more than anything should divide us, and Who weeps at so much of a world gone so badly wrong and in such need of folks like us to run to it a saving word. Gird up the loins of your mind to run, to act. Indeed. And yet Peter knows that we will fall exhausted if we do not run without **hope** to power and fuel us; and it is to that injunction, that little word, that I now turn.

For, indeed, Peter also tells us to “*set **all** your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.*” Yet another little word: “**All**.” ALL our hope. And that little word asks us to answer honestly: IS all our hope on God? For I know that sometimes I have not done what Peter says but have instead set *some* of my hope on God and some of it on other things. I have sometimes preferred prudence instead – like the roulette player, as I've told you about watching once in Las Vegas, who bet both black and red because then there'll be at least the illusion of some return. And even though you won't go forward, a hedged bet means you won't go back either. You can safely stay the same. But Peter didn't counsel prudence. Instead he offered the astoundingly audacious advice that we are called to place **all** our hope on the **grace** of God. This is an astounding claim, made all the more astounding because it is addressed to a flock who were far away from home, strangers and exiles in the strange lands of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia, facing persecution and the threats

of a hostile culture. But Peter leaves no room for prudence, or “realism,” does he? No, **all** your hope on God. No betting on both, no hedging your bets. And so what about us here at First Christian Church – those of us who may not be in exile in Pontus or Galatia but who most assuredly find ourselves in a strange and sometimes mystifying culture? Just this: If we do not put **all** our hopes in God, then our ability to be a beacon of hope to those who are hurting and helpless and hopeless will instead be a tiny thing increasingly capable only of illuminating the shadows of our own insecurities and fears and worries.

So, my friends, as we begin this new program year, let us indeed – even amidst the worries and the fears we have about money or attendance or buildings, even amidst our tastes about what “should” or “should” not be a part of worship, even amidst our very changing cultural realities – set **all** of our hope on the grace of God. That is what God is inviting you to do this day and every day: set all your hope on God. Be an individual, be a family, be a congregation, that takes this hope and multiplies it, shares it, shouts it, lives it. This week I read an article that reminded churches of what their mission must truly be in a culture where too many people are battered and buffeted: “What we are now is mission outposts. We are islands in a world full of increasingly adrift people. We are places of solace and hope, community and hospitality for people who are too smart to believe in God and pretty convinced they don’t need the church — until they do.”³

“Until they do.” My friends, may our beloved First Christian Church stake all our

³Amy Butler, “The Shocking Un-Truth about Church Budgets,”
<http://www.abpnews.com/opinion/item/8824-the-shocking-un-truth-about-church-budgets>

hope on God by continuing to take joy in lively worship which always has as its first and foremost goal the reaching out to new people who do not know what God can do in their lives but who now find that they need to know and who have been hurt and abraded by experiences of “church” in the past. May we stake all our hope on God by continuing to offer a safe haven and the experience of unconditional love and welcome to children and youth who live in such perilous and scary and tempting times. Let us stake all our hope on God by making it our first priority to remind those at our doorsteps who are deluded by lies about what will make them happy that it is in Christ Jesus that there is true peace and true sustenance and true joy.

For you see, that may be the best little word of all: joy. Because as we stake our hope on being a welcoming people, as we continue to put away our squabbles over things that don’t matter, as we bring everything we have and are to the opportunity to tell people the kind of church we are and the kind of gentle and gracious God we serve – as we do these things we can indeed know a depth of joy that will surprise us.