

Community Church of Issaquah

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## Believing in What We Cannot See

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Even though I should probably keep it a deep dark secret, it's always been difficult for me to deny that indeed I do come from the South. I've tried over the many years since I moved away from my family's home in Alabama to lose my Southern accent. But every now and then I can hear a word or phrase sneak out when I speak and I am not able to un-say it. The other part of my dark secret that isn't so much a secret is that I am also ordained in the Southern Baptist Convention. Happily, though, I have been able to un-do that secret. It seems I became too liberal for my dear Baptist brothers and sisters when the ultra-conservatives took control of the denomination in the late 1970's, and I was asked to leave. It was a cause for celebration on both our parts!

One of the doctrines that is sacrosanct to Southern Baptist is the belief that the Bible is literally true – every word. That was a hurdle I never could clear. How could it be literally true when there were instances in the Scriptures that were contradictory. How could Judas have died by hanging himself in one telling of the story and throwing himself off a cliff onto the rocks in another? When I asked a clergy colleague about that, I was told, “Well, he tried to hang himself but the rope broke and he fell down on the rocks.” Really? You want me to believe that story?

The same contradiction strikes me and many others who are scholars when we focus on the authorship of some of the books in the Bible. I don't want to disillusion you, but there are these historical finds, such as the belief that the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament Prophets may

have had multiple writers. Sorry if I burst your bubble about believing that the name that appears on the writing is the person who actually wrote it. And please, whatever you do, never tell the fundamentalist Christians those little truths.

Today we're focusing on the writing we find in the book of First Peter, which begins with these words, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." And from those words we would assume that Peter is laying claim to the writings. Interesting. Because no one who studies the Scriptures believes that Peter actually wrote it. Some say it could have been written by Peter's secretary as Peter dictated the words. By the way, that kind of personal recorder is called an 'amanuensis.' I know that words because it appeared on my New Testament final exam in seminary and I had no idea what it was, so I just wrote – refrigerator – like the Amana brand. I got half a point credit for being creative. Anyway. . . .

Peter was an undereducated fisherman, a common man who left his work to follow Christ and eventually could lay claim to being the best friend to Jesus. There is no evidence that Peter ever spoke Greek, much less wrote in that language. And there is certainly no evidence that Peter had a deep knowledge of philosophy and the rhetoric of the Greek language at the time of his life. The two books attributed to Peter seem to bear more similarity to Paul's writings in the epistles. So, we begin our look at these beautiful words of encouragement found in First Peter uncertain who wrote them. Perhaps that doesn't even matter. We do know that they were written and directed toward the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. Do those places sound familiar to you today? Think you could locate them on a

2017 atlas? Today, all five of these countries are found in one place on the map -- the country of modern-day Turkey.

Whoever wrote these verses wrote them for a purpose. These were troubled times and those who had become believers of Christ were facing a great deal of opposition and persecution. It's hard for us to imagine that being a follower of Christ could get you killed, but for the first century Christians, that was a very distinct possibility. Though you and I are not under the same type of persecution for being believers, there is a strong lesson here for us as well. The concept of suffering for doing what is right is as relevant today as it was in the first century AD. We are fortunate in American that we would more likely be persecuted for not being a believer in Christ. Oddly, however, identifying as a Christian today doesn't necessarily mean that you are an active disciple. Here's an interesting statistic about the role of Christians in the previous election. Did you know that 60% of those who identified themselves as Evangelical Christians and voted for the current president never attend church. Let that sink in. 60% never go to church.

The fine line of the principle of separation of church and state which is the base of our nation's founding and our constitution has been crossed most dramatically in our current political environment. How often do we hear, "This is a Christian nation"? That mindset has led to the misconception that Christianity is the only valid religion. It is those who do not accept that belief system who are the persecuted. Muslims, Jews, and even atheists are targets of oppression and prejudice. Our world is the reverse of what Peter talks about. Many followers of Christ have taken on the role of the oppressor. It is the people outside that circle of faith who often suffer for doing what they believe to be right. We often

read about Christians in the Middle East or Egypt or China who are targets of murder or persecution. But who in America is persecuted?

How comforting it would be for those strangers, as Peter writes, if they could hear a message that “even if they do suffer for doing what is right, they are blessed.” Can you picture an Evangelical minister standing in the pulpit reading the words we shared from Peter’s writings this morning telling a room full of Muslims, Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, Gays, Atheists, and more, quote “Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” I would surely love to be able to sit in a pew in a conservative, evangelical church and hear those words spoken. But, more often than not, it is the evangelical followers of Jesus who believe they are being persecuted.

It happens like this:

- I won’t sell flowers to a gay couple because I believe homosexuality is against my religion, and now I’m being persecuted because I’m a Christian. Or
- They want me to include birth control in my company’s insurance plan and my pastor says that’s against God’s teachings and now I’m being persecuted. Or
- I’m a pharmacist and my minister said it would be against our faith if I were to dispense emergency contraception. Or
- A transgender person is breaking God’s law of creation, and I just cannot let them use a public bathroom just because they say they are a woman now and used to be a man.

But this is not what is intended in the Scriptures as persecution.

There is a more meaningful direction given to those of us who are believers in Christ. At the core of this passage is this admonition:

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” The reality is that you and I may never experience the kind of persecution that the early Christians did. But we will most certainly find ourselves in situations where we are asked to defend our faith.

How can you say you’re a Christian but you believe . . . . fill in the blank. Because you and I have taken the position of a more inclusive Gospel, we often are seen as “outside the norm” of real Christianity. Whether that questioning of our faith comes from more conservative family members, neighbors, co-workers, or even strangers, each of us needs to be ready with our answer for the hope that is inside of us. Put it this way, why do you believe the way you do? Why do you believe that God accepts your way of thinking? And why do you think that the grace and mercy of Christ will sustain you through your life?

This is a reality for me more often than I can say. I feel as if I am on the defensive so often from those who either judge or condemn me for the way in which I live out my relationship with Christ as a disciple. So, what is my advice to you? I think the writer of this first book of Peter sums it up nicely. “Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.” Perhaps that can best be summed up like this – be true to yourself and your own beliefs and do not let those who pass judgement or criticize take away the hope that you have in knowing without a doubt that doing what you believe is right will surely bring you closer to God. Isn’t that what we mean when we sing, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine”?

May that be your reason for hope. Amen.