

*“3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living **hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” 1 Peter 1:3-6*

Bethany Straker is our goddaughter is an accomplished book illustrator. She gives us copies of some of her books and one is slightly weird but it caught my eye. The title is: Why am I scared of everything?

- Environment
- Failure
- Aging
- Terrorism

There is real fear in the world. Those are just some of the things people worry about. Let me ask you a question: By how much has terrorism increased since 9/11?

- 10%?
- 60%?
- 120%?

The answer is, it hasn’t: “terrorism incidents outside of warzones in the post-9/11 era have decreased in absolute terms”

Another example: what percentage of the German population is Moslem?

- 5%?
- 15%?
- 25%?

The correct answer is 6% Note the huge discrepancy, also for UK and US between fact and perception.

The moral is that we exaggerate our fears. Mary thinks I’m a glass-half-empty person but fact is, we all are. This is why when we criticize someone we should say 5 positive things for every negative comment. People remember the negative comments and they blow them up. Bad news sells newspapers. There’s a saying among journalists: “If it bleeds it leads”. Good news has been tried and failed. When we get scared we overemphasize the negative. And we get tribal. We become irrational. We cluster in our little groups. Politicians know this and the less reputable use it to motivate us to vote for them. One British politician was laughed at recently for saying the public had had enough of “so-called experts”. In other words, he was mocking rational thought and rational choices.

Now I know that so far I sound like a speaker for the British Humanist Association but bear with me. The Bible is nothing if not realistic about the human condition. It knows that we are fearful. The book of Job: “man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward”. (Job 5:7). In the NT Jesus says “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). That is why the Bible says “fear not”, “do not be afraid”, “have no fear” a grand total of 365 times. And it does so because that’s most people’s ground state. We worry. I don’t know whether women worry more than men or whether they’re simply better at expressing their emotions.

When I was much younger I didn’t find it easy to talk to girls. I only had a brother and went to an all-male school. And I was a techie. So relationships were a mystery to me. It’s just as well Mary made most of the running! And if I hadn’t married Mary, I’d never have dared to move to Germany: too scared of the unknown, too fearful of loneliness.

None of us can be confident about what will happen in our lives and if people say they are, they’re fooling themselves. What does the old hymn say?

“I know not what of good or ill  
May be reserved for me,  
Of weary ways or golden days,  
Before His face I see.”

Anyone remember the chorus?

The book of Job says “man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward”. Jesus said “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

So: to recap. We are not promised comfortable or easy lives but we’re promised a good end. When I was baptised a verse from the book of Revelation was sung: “*be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life*”. Now I know there’s a good argument to be made that John was warning the church at Smyrna to prepare for persecution. But nevertheless it’s true for all of us. We don’t know the future. I don’t buy the line that if you’re a believer you’ll be prosperous and healthy; I don’t find that anywhere in Scripture. What I find is hope for the future. For the believer, the opposite of fear is hope.

The Hebrew word for hope is "tikvah", a guaranteed assurance that if the Lord says it will come to pass, then it will do so. Prov: 23:18 is an example: “There is surely a future hope for you”. We might describe it as “expectant waiting”. Fear paralyses and weakens us, clouds our minds, but hope in the Lord strengthens and energises:

*“but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.” Isa 40:31*

Isaiah doesn't say you won't fail – we've all known failure – but he says even if you fail, your strength will be renewed because you hope in the Lord.

Rick Warren says “We've all made mistakes... not only have you made mistakes in the past, but you'll also make more in the future... Even playing it safe and refusing to take risks is a mistake.”. He adds “You'll never overcome your fear of failure until you fully accept the reality that you're not perfect,” the pastor says. “You've already failed many, many times in life. So have I. You're a failure in some area of your life right now. And you'll fail a lot more in the future... What's the answer to not being perfect? Grace. God isn't out to get you”

Remember the hymn we sang last week?

“He lavishes grace as our burdens grow greater  
He sends us more strength as our labours increase  
To added afflictions, He offers more mercy  
To multiplied trials, He multiplies peace”

With that in mind, let's look at 1 Peter, verses 3 and 4:

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into **a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you”*

The first thing to note is that when you read the word "hope" in the Bible it's not used in the ordinary English sense of “I don't know what's going to happen, I just hope it happens.” In other words, we have a desire but we're not sure it's going to be fulfilled. The Bible isn't talking about wishful thinking. That's absolutely not what is meant by Christian hope. Christian hope is something else. It's that when God has promised that something is going to happen and you put your trust in that promise. Christian hope is a confidence that something will come to pass because God has promised it will come to pass.

The word hope is used consistently in the New Testament in the sense of “eager expectation that God will keep his promises”. In Romans 8 Paul talks of our present sufferings not being worth comparing with what's to come He says that *“the creation waits in **eager expectation** for the children of God to be revealed”*. Another word for that would be hope. It's the same in Galatians 5. Paul warns the Galatians that being Jewish isn't going to help them. He says to them,

*“4 You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we **hope**.”*

“We eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” Paul makes clear the Jews weren't entitled to salvation because of their race and, indeed, nor are we because we attend church. What gives us hope isn't being in a holy huddle but the resurrection of Jesus. We

look forward to receiving an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade That is the source of biblical hope. Jesus has died and is risen and he's preparing a place for us. And he says he'll come back and take us to be with him that we also may be where he is. If God is good and never leaves us nor forsakes us, then whatever difficulties may arise we can be secure in His love and the certainty that no matter how bad things are now, we'll end well.

Verses 5 and 6 of 1 Peter speak of believers

*who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trial*

In other words, no matter how difficult our lives, hope should lead us to joy. Paul explicitly commands us in Rom 12:12 to *"Be joyful in **hope**, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer"*.

How can we be joyful when things are difficult? Paul says in Romans 5, *"hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.* How else could the martyrs of the church gone to their deaths rather than recant or sacrifice to the emperor? How else can Christians in dangerous countries maintain their faith unless by the power of the Holy Spirit they hold to that living hope, that eager expectation?

If God pours His grace and His love on us what more do we need? When Paul writes to the Philippians he's confident: *"he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* We can be confident that what God has started He will finish.

So to close: Jesus said "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Yes, there will be trouble. But we should be like Simeon, waiting day after day for the consolation of Israel, in other words the Messiah. The Holy Spirit led him to Jesus in the temple. We've let by the Holy Spirit to Jesus too. So don't look back Don't obsess about your mistakes. God has a plan for your life – might not be what you expected. Might not be a smooth path. But He promises peace. You can be confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Press on. Keep running. There's a goal, a prize for which God is calling you heavenward in Christ Jesus.

In Matthew 12:21 Jesus quotes Isaiah:

*"In his name the nations will put their **hope**."*

Today on the first Sunday of Advent we look back on the fulfilment of that hope as we look forward, running our own race, pressing on towards the goal, looking to Jesus and confident that the Holy Spirit is ...

## BENEDICTION

Rom 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."