

May 21 2017

Reading from the Bible

I Peter 3:13-16a, 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Sermon *“Defense or Offense? What’s Your Position?”*

We are returning to 1 Peter, and if you remember from last week, Peter was probably in prison in Rome. He was keenly aware there were some real fears in these people’s lives, fears of persecution, and fears of resentment. The people who he is writing to are living in eastern Turkey what was called Asia Minor and they are starting to experience some persecution and some problems. They are not thrown into the lions yet that comes later but they are experiencing the same negativity and the same oppression. They might not get the best jobs if they can even get a job. And Peter is writing to them to erase some of their fears. We will look first at a couple of scriptures in First Peter---1 Peter 3:13-16a—1 Peter 4:12-14 and the last one 1 Peter 5:6-11 which is essential to this message.

1 Peter 3:13-16a

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

And then jumping over to chapter 4:12-16

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

And then turning to chapter 5

1 Peter 5:6-11

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will he restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”

Whether you believe or not about the devil-that is another sermon or two for another time. But I don't think that most of us would deny that there is power of evil in the world. Many of us would agree with Paul when he said, "I would like to do the right thing but I can't seem to do it, I do the wrong thing and that is the very thing I don't want to do." The power of evil and the devil makes for a great sermon, and it worked well for the sawdust trail and leads people to repentance-- people who are alcoholic, gamblers, liars, robbers and others. But there is a more subtle and dangerous evil today than what concerned the people on the road or the sawdust trail and heard the message of repent or you will go to that other place. This more subtle evil is calling us away from our source of hope and life and makes for anxiety and despair and keeps us from making effective witnesses for Jesus as well as robbing the joy and secure living in Christ.

When I was in the Seattle area, I used to listen to what was known as the Compline Vesper Service at the cathedral. It was on classic about 9:30 I believe. It was the last service of the day at the cathedral and I loved it because it was so orderly. Sometime the life of being a chaplain is a little chaotic, there was lots of tension and lots of decisions. The service was very non-participatory. However, there was one actual prayer that people participated in and the center piece of this service every night was -- "be watchful be vigilant. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour." A great bedtime verse isn't it? It was comforting because the service ended with rest in peace and claim the strength of the Lord in faith whatever for what would devour you. I think that one of the things that we need to be aware of as Christians is what can consume us if we don't watch out. In our world none of us are immune or impervious unless we are hermits. None of us are immune of the constant assault of our senses by the news, interpretive news, repeated news, breaking news. It is hard to escape the news and get the message of the value the stories, the predictions, try to decipher and discern what is truth? Some of us feel like we should be like John Denver, people should turn off the TV, throw away the newspapers and move away to the country and buy a farm. A lot of us here live in the country and maybe many of you have a farm and you still have the TV and the newspaper and now you may have the internet. One writer said, I miss the day when the most serious thing on the TV was the Twilight Zone and not the nightly news.

According to a survey about anxiety, people say they were stressed out about the future of the nation. The anxiety study was very specific like the story of the New York mayor who was fired for getting in trouble. The anxiety fear is more displaced and nebulous. It is kind like those days when you know there is a thunder storm coming and it is getting muggy and the clouds are there and you can feel like it is coming, see the lightning strikes and hear the thunder rolls and then rain

comes down, It is that feeling. There is also something going on beyond politics, people are stressed by the fact of the world's unpredictability of life. In the study about stress, the worse affect of uncertainty is not knowing rather than whether it will happen or not.

They did a wonderful survey but I wouldn't participate because it was about snakes. I am not wild about snakes. It had to do with two big rocks or whether you would turn over the rocks and whether or not there would be snake or not. And if you roll over the rock and if there was a snake you would also get a small shock. It was Ok as long you could predict under which rock there was a snake and that there would always be a shock when you did that. But when they started mixing things up it became unpredictable. When that happened the stress level which was measured by heart beat and eye movement accelerated.

Money and economy are generally the top stresses. I would add family relationships to that one. Our brains like to work on some level of predictability. If we don't know what will happen next and if we don't know what action to take or which actions not to take or how it will turn out it often leads to a sense of helplessness. We need to remain on guard if these things suddenly change. Maybe you find that you need to check your email first thing in the morning or see people you have to see. Many people do that. I have to admit every Sunday morning I look to see if we have gone to war with somebody so I am not surprised when I go to church. What kind of world is that that you have to constantly worry about those things. Many of us do that, you are always checking the news. There is fear that someone will turn them in. There is a sense of persecution at somewhat low level and we can say from a distance we are safe but it is not for the people in the midst of it. The people Peter was writing were in that spot. It would get worse and there would be horrible, horrible killing of Christians just like when Rome was burning and blame was put on the Christians. The persecution was intermittently depending who was the emperor across the empire. And anxiety bothers all of us. What is going to happen is horrible and the hardest question is about our nation right now.

I pulled out some notes that I had from a sermon 35 years ago when I first preached this sermon and in it I mentioned being watchful and vigilant. I don't know if you know it but a lion's roar can be heard up to five miles away five miles. That is easy to say, but you don't know for sure if it five miles away or five hundred feet. We are to be watchful and vigilant. The threat of anxiety can consume us when we start feeling tense and when we start checking our email the first thing when we roll over in bed; when we watch the news to see what happened next; and when we are glued to our seats and watch TV to see how things are going to unfold and there is always breaking news. And it is the same breaking news we have seen but we have to watch it because it might be something worse.

I talked to somebody when I was in back in Wyoming and they were complaining about all these things and they don't even know what is true and they are predicting hype and wild ideas. I said to this person you are watching it and you are so tired, just turn off the TV and we did. The first thing that we need to do is be vigilant. If we are allowing forces in our world to captivate us and to hold us captive we become anxious. Remember evil is still out there and it won't go away; but we can be aware of what is happening. Peter also talks about preparing your mind. In many places in his letter and the paper I gave you, is what we are to focus our minds on. What you focus your mind on is what dominates your life. One of my favorites is the scripture from Philippians "If there is anything that is beautiful turn to that and turn to good and fill your mind with that". That doesn't mean I am going to the website and clicking on good news. Part of what that scripture is saying, I am going to seek what is good. The choir just sang —O Happy Day. We are to be joyful. It is hard to be joyful when you are over whelmed with anxiety and you wonder when was your last party was or when you last enjoyed someone's company. Discipline yourself and think on the true hope of Jesus Christ. You are not defensive unless you choose to be. I don't think so much that I can control my immediate environment. No matter what TV stations you listen to, it is not impossible to get away from the issues and turn them over to the Lord. Think on and listen to what is good and has the ring of truth. There is lots of advice in those newspaper columns about stress and one of the first ones that I found was to limit your time to listening to the news and then turn it off once you know the events of the day. We need to practice being mindful when we are watching the news and not keep chewing on it like a cow with its cud. Focus on the good parts of your life. Peter said it over and over again, the many of the same scripture verses that are on the sheets which were given to the congregation this morning. The verses remind you-- you are the people of God --have faith together in prayer and focus on God. Remember God restores and strengthen. God's promises are for today. We do make it our business to cling to the promises of God in our lives Jesus said there will be wars and rumors of wars. He told us that in this world we will have trouble--no kidding. Don't be anxious about anything and look at those scriptures, read them every day and memorize them. Let the verses speak to you and pick one that will say something that you need to hear.

I have been reading this book, *Jesus Calling Me* every morning and this woman writes about how Jesus walks and talks with her. She remind me- of this a paraphrase, "It is not so much as chaos swirling around you or the events of the world that seem out of control or even dangerous that make us anxious but it is our thoughts about them. Cast your anxiety on God.

Gracious God we thank you for the truth of your promises. You are in our lives nothing, nothing can separate you from us in Christ Jesus. Amen

