

Anchors of Faith Series: Presence of Christ
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1 Peter 1:16-21
Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

These days it's hard to know what to hope for. In California we have been in drought, for example; we used to hope for rain. Now we have had so much rain that mudslides have closed parts of Hwy 17; parts of San Jose have been flooded. The Oroville Dam is so full it has had to release excess water – putting too much pressure on a spillway that has been compromised. Water experts, their mindsets shaped by years of drought and the need to conserve water, waited too long to make a decision. The result: chaos.

In Peter's second letter, (the basis for this 2-part sermon series), he addresses a people in chaos. Chapter 2 sets the context. The early church had been awaiting Jesus' return; he had promised to come back "soon," but years later, he still hadn't shown up. Believers were beginning to get discouraged. Into this cracked infrastructure of hope, scoffers and false teachers were beginning to take hold. "He's not coming back!" they declared. "It's all a hoax." A mudslide of confusion and chaos followed: everyone had his own opinion. Who was right? They asked themselves, "Whom should I believe... and why?"

It's not so different today. In our world, confusion reigns on several levels. Most troubling, we are thrown into confusion over matters of authority. People wonder: is God who he says he is? Is the Bible true? When will Jesus return? And what am I meant to be doing in the meantime? Everyone has his own opinion -- as in the last words of the book of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." It was chaos. When authority is in question, the confidence and hope of a community are in doubt.

So, where do you sink your anchor? When chaos descends, what keeps you grounded? In this series, we will explore some of the answers the Apostle Peter gives to keep people anchored in their faith. Today, looking at chapter 1, Peter gives us two answers: anchor your faith in the presence of Jesus and in the prophetic word. As we will see, the two are intertwined.

First, sink your anchor in the presence of Christ. When Peter was confronted with questions, he responded with these words:

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." 18 We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

The disciples were eyewitnesses. They were primary sources. They had walked and talked with Jesus; they had seen his glory on the mountain when he was transfigured before them. *They had heard the voice of God*, declaring Jesus to be his Son. And as we heard from our Gospel lesson today, God concluded his declaration by saying, "Listen to him!" My friends, when you are confronted by questions about authority, go directly to the source.

Seek the presence of Jesus. Once a group of people came to the disciples with a request. "Sir," they said, "we want to see Jesus." Now, they were able to access Jesus directly, physically. But you and I don't have that same kind of access. There may be times in your life when you think, "If only I could see Jesus... if only I could know he's really here... then I think I could really trust." My friends, even though Jesus isn't visibly in front of you, he has promised to be present with you and to be accessible to you. Searching Scripture, then, let's explore three ways you can find the presence of Jesus in your life, today.

First, *trust in his promise*. Before Jesus ascended to heaven he told his followers, "Be sure of this: I am with you always, to the end of the age." Long before, the prophet Isaiah had said, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel," which means, "God with us." That is the promise. Jesus is "God with us" -- in the flesh. And he will always be with you.

It starts with faith. Sometimes you are alone, heart-sore, not sure where to turn. In those times, trust in Jesus' promise to be with you, seeking him in prayer. He is there. I remember my Great-Uncle Peder who told the story of one night when had been sound asleep, while his wife tossed and turned. She finally touched his shoulder and said, "Are you awake?" Well, he didn't say, "I am now." Instead he replied simply, "Yes. I'm awake." She sighed saying, "I can't sleep either." So, without saying a word, he prayed in his heart, "Lord, give to my beloved, sleep." He later told us, "Before I finished the prayer she was snoring. Then *I* was awake -- wondering if God could be that close." And he searched the Scriptures until he found this verse, "Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear." (Isaiah 65:24) God is there! You can depend on it.

Trust in Jesus' promise. That's the first step. The second is this: *Meet with his people*. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in your midst." Go to worship, where you will be surrounded by God's faithful people as they sing hymns, pray, take the Sacrament, listen to God's Word. When you are hurting, wounded and sore -- *that's* the time to be in church. Not like a grieving friend of ours, who couldn't bring himself to go to church after his son died in a tragic accident. Not even to the Easter service, where he felt his sorrow had no place. My friends, that's the very time you need to be in church -- to hear the promises of God. Jesus is here, right in our midst. He will speak to you in many ways as you worship and fellowship with God's people. Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this: "Where a people prays, there is the church; and where the church is, there is never loneliness." Meet with God's people, and there you will find the presence of Christ. In Grow Groups. In the company of Christian friends. Call us. We will come.

So, *trust in Jesus' promise that he is with you. Meet with God's people, especially in worship*. And third, *share his concern for those in need*. Listen again to Jesus: "Whatever you did to these, the least of my brethren, you have done it to me." (Matthew 25:40) Where will you find Jesus? Where ever you are serving the least of these.

So who are the "least of these?" In Jesus' day, it was the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, a group of folks mentioned again and again. Well, who are the ones marginalized in our society today? Refugees; immigrants; Muslims... there are those who are afraid to raise their heads at the

moment. How can you serve them – as a servant serves? Perhaps it is someone you know. These folks are not faceless. Just look around you. When my father-in-law lost his wife of 60 years, it was tough. At first, he just stayed in his room, his door closed, nursing his grief. Then after awhile he opened his door, and the others in his retirement facility would stop in to say hi, offering a sympathetic ear. And then finally, he went up to the skilled care unit to visit those patients who had no one to visit them. He sought out the least in his community. You see, when you serve others, that is precisely where you will find Jesus. This congregation is Walking for Water; offering food to the hungry through FISH; opening up a shelter to homeless women – take part in that! And guess what? As you are busy serving, you will find the presence of Jesus there. Reach out in any way you can. You will be a blessing. And even more, you will be blessed by the presence of Christ in their midst.

When you are in doubt, and chaos is all around you, sink your anchor in the presence of Christ. Sink it also in the prophetic Word. It's all intertwined together, as you have already seen. But let's go a step further. Peter tells us today:

19 We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it....

Note what Peter says. Scripture is *reliable*: grounded in history, validated by eye-witnesses; affirmed in fulfillment. In the gospel of Matthew alone, we find that more than 20 predictions recorded in the Old Testament are fulfilled, collectively, in Christ. Scripture is reliable, it has been proven to be true. It is also the very voice of God. Its teachings originate with God himself. Peter says,

21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

You see, there are various ways to read Scripture. Many people read it as a narrative, and that is right; it tells a story. Others read the Bible for information, and that is good and right as well. But Bonhoeffer, echoing Peter's advice, encourages you to read it as a disciple, listening for God's voice. Read it as a child of the Father, who speaks to you through these pages.

Bonhoeffer said,

"...read the Bible not just as a theology student but as a disciple of Jesus Christ."

"When you read the Bible, you must think that here and now God is speaking with me..."

And, in Holy Scripture we will find "quite a personal message of God's love for us."

You see, the presence of Christ and the prophetic word are intertwined. Because the Word is reliable, because it is God's voice speaking to you, you will find Christ there. And it also gives you words to speak as you pray.

So here's what I want you to do this week. As you read through Scriptures, seek God's voice in it. Pray through it. Here's an example. Take a look at these words from Psalm 139. Read them aloud with me.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Rather than just finding information there of God's nearness and intimate knowledge of you, pray it. Something like this:

Oh Lord, you know me better than I know myself. You know my thoughts – even before I think them. You know my activities and my behaviors. Lord, that's both frightening but also deeply comforting. I know I am never alone, nor am I without guidance, love and protection, for you are there.

Go on, then, a little deeper into the psalm. Read these lines with me:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Again, go back and pray this, letting these words guide your prayer.

Holy Spirit, you are the wind that surrounds me, the air that gives me breath and life. There is nowhere that you are not. Even what I experience as the darkness of my soul is bright with light for you!

Help me to trust you more deeply. Help me to see that what I do not understand, you know completely. What I cannot see, you have already mapped out. Lord, I am yours. I trust you with my life. Show me how to live for you.

The presence of Christ and the prophetic word – God is there. For you. They are two of your anchors of faith in chaotic times. Sink your anchor deep. It will keep you on sure and solid ground. (Prayer)