A Centered Hope

The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott

1Peter 1:3-8

Sermon Series: The Life You’ve Always Wanted

Both of them are affirming their wonder, their respect and their appreciation for God in the person of Jesus.

When I was just beginning to learn my work, I was an associate pastor to Dr. Jim Tozer, one of the finest pastors anywhere, anytime. Jim was a wonderful mentor, teacher and friend. One thing I was uncertain about was what to say during a memorial service—a funeral—the very kind of words that David Jordan-Haas so wonderfully used during the memorial service yesterday for our very loved Eric Robinson. So I accompanied Jim Tozer as he met with families, as he led the services in the sanctuary, as he spoke by the graveside. I discovered that he opened every single memorial service with the same words. I Peter chapter one, verses three and four. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, reserved in heaven for you.

My first funeral service was for Kevin Harper, a dear young man who had been in the college ministry Ann Marie and I led at Purdue University, killed in a head-on car collision. The second funeral was for Jim Tozer’s own father. No pressure. The opening words Jim used from I Peter to begin every single memorial service are the very same words I have used to begin every single one of countless memorial services over nearly forty years. Oddly, I have never before preached on this text, but it’s in my bones. It’s in my soul. It’s a huge text with gigantic, wonderful implications for your life and for my life. It’s a great text for you to commit to memory!

What fascinates me, first of all, is to compare the words the Apostle Peter used to begin this letter with the words the Apostle Paul used in the beginning of his second letter to the Corinthians. They both offer an identical doxology: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then they both refer to God’s mercy with Peter, continuing with 4 who comforts...
us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

The word he used that is translated affliction is the odd sounding Greek word *thlipsis*, meaning a crushing pressure. It means agony, anguish, pain, distress and misery.

William Barclay described a practice in ancient England. If you were accused of a crime and refused to confess to the crime, you would be forced to lie down on your back and weights would be piled on your chest until you either confessed or you were crushed. That’s the idea behind *thlipsis*—life-crushing pressure. We are talking about real pressure and not typical hassles and irritations of daily life.

Our son Lee has a delicious soup he loves to make. He takes those huge, oversized zucchinis that get ahead of you in the garden, cuts them into half-inch slices, puts them on the grill, drizzles olive oil and adds a touch of sea salt. After cooking with a touch of burn, he throws them into a blender with a bit of broth or milk and voila. Very yummy, hot or cold. So, two weeks ago, I came across two such huge zucchinis at a Farmer’s Market and following Lee’s process which takes some doing, I finally had my soup whirring away in the blender. When finished, I couldn’t seem to get the blender pitcher off of its base. So I rotated it—too much—and suddenly, the pitcher came loose minus its bottom, and the soup flowed all over the counter.

Now, a year ago, I preached a sermon on our Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Lively Virtues series titled “Get a Grip”—on anger. I confess to you, I forgot whatever brilliance I offered. I was annoyed. I was hopping mad. The temperature spike that day was not due to global warming. Eventually, the Spirit and I had a little discussion. Get over it, Stan. That was annoying, that was irritating, that was a hassle—but it was not *thlipsis*—affliction. Affliction is real suffering and, if you are suffering today, the Apostle Paul is saying to you that our God comforts you, comes along side of you, so that one day you may comfort others with the comfort you receive. And, in a few minutes, we will see how this ties in with the Apostle Peter’s letter that we are studying this morning.

So Peter writes, 3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, reserved in heaven for you. There are some quick, wonderful observations to make about this. He caused us to be born anew. The word “caused” tells
A centered hope is a living hope.

Now, what kind of a hope is a living hope? To understand it, think about the difference between “wishing” and “hoping.” If I say I wish I had a home in Honolulu, I wish I was six feet eight inches tall, I wish I could run like Usain Bolt, what I really mean by wishing is that is what I am wanting. A wish is a want for which there is no reason to believe it will happen. Now suppose you had lived in the city of New Orleans, that you were supposed to have been out of town but had stayed home when Hurricane Katrina hit. Your house was submerged in water and you, struggling to survive, manage to get on top of the roof but there is no one in sight. The rain and wind are terrible. All your neighbors think you are gone. Do you wish to be rescued? Do you want to be rescued? You bet you do, but in the midst of the horrible storm you have no reason to think you will be rescued, so you only can wish.

Suddenly, you hear an odd noise piercing the crescendo of the hurricane, and through the rain, you see a boat driven by a dear friend. Waving madly, your friend sees you and hollers through a megaphone, “I can’t get my boat near you but hang on and help will come.” Instantly, you feel what is called the thrill of hope, because, unlike a wish that has no reason to come true, true hope is always centered on a reason to believe it will happen. When you wished for a rescuer, you had no reason to believe that anybody would actually rescue you. You could only wish. When you heard the voice of your friend, a reliable person, and that person yelled, “I’m going for help. We’ll get you. Hold on.” Hope is born. I call it a centered hope because it is centered on a reason to believe. A centered hope is a living hope. As a matter of fact, the promise of help your friend gave changed your wish into a hope. That is a marvelous thought—a promise changes a wish into a hope—it gives a reason to believe what is hoped for will happen. We know of the resurrection of Jesus. We hear his promise to come for us. Hope lives.

He caused us to be born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Now it’s huge here to understand that when talking about the resurrection of Jesus, the bringing of Jesus back to life after he was dead, Peter is not speaking symbolically, figuratively, metaphorically or mythologically. His dearest friend, Jesus, was crucified and dead, but Jesus did not stay dead, and Peter, who personally had looked into the
empty tomb of Jesus, knew it. Jesus was raised physically-bodily-from the dead and stands among us right here, right now, in his risen power. The Egyptians have a saying, “To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again.” The idea is that if you speak the name Abraham Lincoln or Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King, Jr then that person lives again—lives in our memory, lives in our regard, in our affection and appreciation—but actually, they are still dead. That is not what Peter means when he speaks of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter means Jesus is actually alive, right here, right now, standing among us in his risen power, looking at you and me, knowing all there is to know about you and me and still loving you and me with all of the overwhelming love of God. And that, my friends, is the basis of our centered and living hope.

Now Peter offers a bit of a “P.S.” to this and then a “so what.” The “P.S.” is that when God has caused us to be born anew to a living hope it was also to an inheritance in heaven—that in heaven our Lord has for you that which is imperishable—meaning indestructible, it is undefiled, meaning it is pure—and it is unfading, meaning it is eternal. Your inheritance from God is reserved in heaven for you right now. The bottom line: whenever that is, you can know that Jesus is waiting for you and that what he has in store for you is good. Very good.

Now, Pastor Pete loves to ask in his sermons the “so what” question. So what? How does this apply to my life and your life right here? Right now? The Apostle Peter thought the same way, and after this incredibly wonderful word about a centered and living hope, he offers this “so what:”⁵ [You] who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials. Here we connect back to what Paul said about thlipsis—affliction. Peter’s word for trial here is not thlipsis, affliction, but it is a word with the similar meaning of trial, trouble or temptation. And the “so what” continues. Paul says, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Just as the Apostle Paul had said that our God comforts us in our affliction so that we may one day comfort others, so Peter is telling us that in your very standing on the centered hope of Jesus in the midst of your affliction, your trials, the genuineness of your faith is revealed. And he concludes with this wonderful note: ⁸
For me it’s the constant reminder that above the field of human endeavor stands the reality of Jesus among us.

Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy.

I must admit that every two years I am something of a summer Olympics-aholic. I record everything. I watch as much as I can. I especially love the competition of track and field and the various foot races around the track. When the recent Opening Ceremonies of the 30th Olympiad opened in London a few weeks ago, I felt goose bumps when the very first thing to happen was a nine-year-old boy, surrounded by a boy’s choir, sang solo the opening words of the great British hymn, “Jerusalem.” I knew instantly that was the closing music of my favorite movie of all time, Chariots of Fire. Chariots of Fire was the story of Eric Liddell, a devout Scottish Christian and Harold Abrahams, an English Jew, two sprinters who ran to glory in the 1924 Olympics. It was said of them at the beginning of the movie, “those few young men with hope in their hearts and wings on their heels.”

Eric Liddell trained for the 100-meter race but ended up running and winning the much longer and much more grueling 400-meter race. He went on to be a Christian missionary in China where he ultimately died from a brain tumor at the end of World War II. All of Scotland mourned. Whenever I hear the theme music of Chariots of Fire by the composer Vangelis, whether on the radio or television, I stop what I am doing. I somehow become instantly and overwhelmingly aware of the overwhelming immediate presence of the God of the universe whose mission we have all embarked upon. It’s been that way for me since I first saw the movie long ago. So you may imagine my delight when that music was played at every medal ceremony in the recent Olympics. For me it’s the constant reminder that above the field of human endeavor stands the reality of Jesus among us.

As these Olympics unfolded there were a number of remarkable stories. Pete referred to a couple of them last week, and one them is the story that most affected me—that of 400-meter sprinter Oscar Pistorius of South Africa. When I first saw a picture of Oscar, also known as the Blade Runner, on his artificial carbon fiber legs, I admit, I, who enjoy running, wondered whether such artificial legs were a help or a hindrance. Reading some of the formal reports about him, I concluded they were more of a hindrance, and as Bill Plaschke of the Los Angeles Times put it, “‘Blade Runner' Oscar Pistorius has an edge, all right—his spirit.’ And here he was running in the quarter final of the men’s 400-meter race at the Olympics; the same 400-meter race—once around the oval track—run by Eric Liddell in 1924 and, as I followed his
This is the Lord Jesus, who has suffered personally, who in his risen presence offers you a living and centered hope as you trust him.

story, I realized Oscar Pistorius was actually living the contemporary vision of *Chariots of Fire*.

Watching his behavior on the track, shaking hands of fellow competitors, exchanging his name bib with Kirani James of Grenada, his expressions of gratitude, his humility about his accomplishments, his eyes often heavenward, hands together and from his remarks during his interviews, I could see that he is clearly a devout Christian, a follower of Jesus. And he brought the Spirit of Jesus into the Games. When he was interviewed after the 100-meter quarter final in which he placed third, he told TODAY’s Savannah Guthrie, “When I got on those starting blocks, I knew 400 is always a tough event. But I had these cramps in my cheeks, I was smiling so much. I was a mixture of butterflies and goose bumps.”

Yet, obviously Oscar Pistorius has faced his own *thlipsis*, his own affliction and, just as obviously, he could have permitted it to overcome his future. Instead he says, “You’re not disabled by the disabilities you have, your are able by the abilities you have.” I happened upon a picture as it went viral online during this period that deeply moved me. It’s Oscar in his running togs, bent over in a runner’s pose next to a two- or three-year-old little girl in the same pose, whose arms end in stumps and under her pretty little dress, you see her standing on the very same kind of bent carbon fiber legs he is standing on. When I see this picture, the words of the texts from the Apostles Paul and Peter came slamming into my mind, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we might comfort others in their affliction with the comfort with which we have received from God, for he has caused us to be born anew to living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials.*

Whatever affliction, whatever trial or trouble you have been through, are in the middle of right now or that may come your way, know that the Lord who loves you understands the pain of the trial, in no way minimizes, trivializes it or denies it. This is the Lord Jesus, who has suffered personally, who in his risen presence offers you a living and centered hope as you trust him. You can trust him fully, without reserve and without having seen him you too may love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. Amen!