

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Before COVID-19 changed our vision, the sight of an enormous white ship floating into exotic ports was commonplace. The cruise ship industry is huge — almost as large as the horizontal skyscraper ships that serve it. Like huge hotels turned onto their side, these glowing, white behemoths dot the oceans. They are the twenty-first century's "white whales."

But before the commercial cruise lines ruled the deep, there were other big white ships that traveled the seas, ships that purposefully put themselves and their crews in harm's way. Naval hospital ships, appropriately designated as "haven class" ships, often offered the closest, most accessible care to wounded troops during World War II and the Korean War. One of those ships was aptly named the "U.S.S. Consolation," a floating hospital capable of caring for over 800 patients and housing a host of medical professionals. These "white whales" offered the best medical treatment possible under hostile, combat conditions. Although hospital ships were painted white and were emblazoned with a red cross to advertise their non-hostile identity, their close proximity to battle zones did not ensure their safety. The business of saving lives is always hazardous duty . . . without hazard pay.

The U.S.S. Consolation served as a hospital ship from 1944-1955. It offered healing and comfort to the wounded in both World War II and the Korean conflict. The "Consolation" was decommissioned in 1958, but instead of being sold for scrap or made into a floating museum, the Consolation was reborn in

1960 when it was turned over to a newly formed civilian service organization — Project Hope. “HOPE” was the acronym for a civilian medical volunteer service organization — “Health Opportunities for People Everywhere,” a precursor to today’s “Doctors Without Borders”. In short, the “U.S.S. Consolation” got a new coat of white paint and was re-named the “S.S. HOPE” — a name that was painted in huge red letters across her bow. For the next fourteen years that “HOPE” floated across the seas of the world, pulling into ports from Malaysia and Indonesia to South America and the Caribbean, bringing hands-on medical care to whomever needed it, offering medical training for any and all local caregivers, and extending medical education to families to help them keep healthy.

What a different image from a cruise ship, aka hangover ship — a hope ship. Instead of a light-blazing, music-blaring, hangover-bringing big white party ship, every time the “S.S. HOPE” pulled into a new port its mission and message spelled out simply four big letters: “H.O.P.E. - hope.”

The clear declaration of hope is what 1 Peter’s letter is all about. Hope in Christ. Hope through the one letter that turns The Lie into The Life: “f” or “faith.” Hope in God’s eternal love. Peter uses “hope” as Paul used the term “faith” — to denote the inner conviction and consciousness of those who both individually and communally confessed Jesus as the Christ and as their Redeemer. This letter comes to us as an Anthem of Hope in a world of tumbling hopes and crumbling dreams.

What is translated in most texts as “conscience” in 1 Peter is the term “syneidesis.” This word can mean something like “moral awareness,” which is how it is most often translated today. But it really is a reference to the attentiveness to the divine, the awareness of divine presence, which lays behind the reason for one’s actions.

In other words, Christian “conscience” in 1 Peter is another reference to an intentional, faithful response to everything a disciple encountered in life. The disciple’s “hope” IS Christ. Our “hope” IN Christ and in God’s mercy THROUGH Christ is the fundamental basis of a Christian consciousness, a Christian “awareness” of God’s presence and ongoing activity in human lives.

For Peter, that inner and outer loop of faith, that individual and communal conviction of divine presence, was the source of a life of hope. In 1 Peter, “Hope” is the most basic Christian attitude in life. Christians have hope in God’s mercy (1:2), and hope in God’s promise of salvation (1:4), and hope in a future where a redeemed relationship with God will bring perfect peace and holy harmony.

In 1 Peter 3:15-16 the text encourages all followers of Jesus to stand up and fess up to “witness” to any and all who question them about the source of their confidence and strength of their “hope.” The “consciousness” of Christians is not some “Jiminy Cricket” voice telling us what to do or not to do. The “Christian conscience” or the “consciousness” of Christians is the conviction of hope, of faith, in the divine promises and pledges that have made it possible to be reborn as redeemed sons and daughters of God. We have hope, we have faith in the promise of new life, a life where frailty and failure, suffering and sin, have all been wiped away by the lineaments and linens of God’s love.

Whether you call it Christian “hope,” as Peter did, or Christian “faith,” as Paul did — it is not a wish to escape to the future or the dream of an afterlife. Christians “hope” is the fuel that gets us through everyday not as a chore, but as a blessing with hints of heaven thrown in. Our “hope,” our “faith,” is based in Christ’s love — a love that rocks this world down to its own shaky foundations and challenges it to find a new foundational “rock.” Our “hope,” our faith is in Christ’s transfiguring power — in the ability and even normativity of the

impossible, a life redeemed to become the promising possibility — because of our hopefulness — our faith — in Christ.

We all want to do better. We all want to be better. We all know that we have “fallen short” of the glory of God. We just need some motivation, some goal besides Wall Street or Rodeo Drive to make the “better” happen.”

Hope in Christ is that motivation. Hope in Christ is that promise. Because Jesus is the ultimate “something better.”

This has not been an easy time for us. While I’m not aware of anyone in our congregation who has lost a family member or a friend to COVID-19, although I have friends who have lost someone, we have lost a lot as a people affected by the response to this pandemic. We have all been shaken to the core as we have attempted to follow the recommendations for social distancing and the wearing of masks when we are out in public... if we have even ventured out in public at all. We have isolated ourselves and have foregone the gathering together in church on Sunday morning to worship the living God... an act that has helped to define who we are and helped us to focus on what is most important in a world that drives us to focus on the trivial. It has been a time when we have experienced a sort of death, the death of what has been familiar as we long for a “normal” that we may never see again.... And we find ourselves in mourning... mourning for what we have lost. Timothy Radcliffe, a master of the Dominican Order, has written a book on baptism where he explains how in the dunking down into the water and the coming up again and gasping for air, we symbolize how in baptism we share Christ’s death and we share Christ’s resurrection. “The only certain thing we know is that we shall die, and yet we have no idea what it means to be dead. So death is both our surest knowledge and our deepest ignorance.” (Taking the Plunge, 168.)

Every day you live, you take a step closer to death.

Every day you live, outface the facts of death with the faith of life.

Every day you live, outface the facts of doubt with the face of faith.

Every day you live, outface the facts of hate with the faith of love.

Every day you live, outface the facts of despair with the faith of hope.

This morning's epistle lesson instructs us to be "prepared" to "give reason for the hope that is in you." The assumption is that disciples of Jesus are known as those who have hope...Big Hope. That's a BIG ASSUMPTION.

There is a song entitled "The Seven Last Days." The song tells of God getting sick and tired of the human species, and taking back, one-by-one, what God had created in the first seven days. Then on that last day, instead of God's rejoicing in what God had created, as in the first time, God cries. That's what Noah's flood was all about that is talked about in today's text, says some Asian Christian theologians. The flood was God's tears. God could not stop crying because of our rebellion and rejection and refusal to be in a relationship with God.

It is striking that these ancestors of ours, these first century Christians, were known to be a high-hope people. There were a lot of reasons for despair in the 1st century. 50% of the people were slaves. Most everyone was malnourished. Most were paying over 50% of income to Rome in taxes. Violence was endemic. There were almost daily insurrections, rebellions, demonstrations. Thousands could be summarily crucified at one time, their dead bodies strung along the road to Galilee as warnings, left on the crosses for days for the vultures to pick the flesh off the bones, and then the feral dogs below to gnaw on the bones and take them away.

During the 7 years from 1861 to 1868, the faculty and student body of William and Mary College in Virginia went home. The school was closed. Only one person remained. The college president. Every day, this one man did

something that was absolutely insane. He walked from his office to the chapel and rang the bell.

NO one was there to hear it.

So why DID he ring it?

It was a defiant act of hope that the silence of the campus was not the final word.

Cling to hope. We are a people of hope. And we need to build ships and skyscrapers of H.O.P.E. in a world that exiles hope, a world full of narcissistic no-hopers and robbers of hope. The best prophets, the best “witnesses,” are not boom-boxes of doom but bearers of hope.

In this time of separation and isolation as we combat a virus that threatens to steal our hope, we can grow our hope stronger by putting our faith and our trust in Christ Jesus... the one, true source of faith, trust, AND hope. In this time that challenges all of us, we are called to proclaim the hope that comes in Christ. With God’s help, we can do that.

Thanks be to God, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.