

“In Defense of Hope”  
a sermon by Zachary Helton  
concerning 1 Peter 3:13-16  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on May 21, 2017

The night was dark and heavy, heavy as the disciples’ eyes as they struggled to stay awake with their tormented friend and master. Finally, after one last plea to keep awake, an ominous party approached through the shadows. They came with swords, clubs, and torches. They came expecting a fight. Some disciples drew their swords, ready to oblige. “Is it time?” one disciple called to Jesus, knuckles white on the hilt of his sword, “Is this it?” He knew that the unwelcome group had come to take away his beloved, his only hope. He knew that this was the time to defend his hope. Before Jesus could speak, one of the servants on the side of the chief priest took a step forward, but with a flash of steel and a piercing cry, he was immediately knocked sideways, pieces of his right ear laying at the ground beside him. Peter glared around unapologetically, just daring the rest of the group, his sword still dripping. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, blotting out all other thoughts. He opened his mouth to issue a warning, a threat, but his words were interrupted by his master. “That’s enough!” Jesus declared with a tone and a look that melted Peter’s resolve. “That’s enough!” he seemed to say to the swords, to the violence in the disciples’ eyes. “That’s enough!” The world stood frozen, unsure of anything as Jesus bent down gently, respectfully, to touch the side of the servant’s trembling head which still bled freely. And in that moment, Peter’s violence was reversed, the flow quenched, and the trembling transformed. Jesus put them all to shame as they carried him away to suffer and die. A few decades later, in a slightly different world, an author writes

a letter in Peter's voice: "Always be ready to defend your hope... *but*, do it with gentleness and respect." On the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter finally seems to understand that our our hope isn't defended by defensive force, not by winning, but through weakness, by losing well. It was as though Jesus didn't want him to win the war for love and equality at all cost, but rather to be steadfast in faith and kindness even when it meant suffering.

In the years following Jesus' death and resurrection, the community known as "The Way" grew exponentially, loving Jesus and obeying his commandments. They loved people in every way that people needed to be loved, taking in unwanted babies that had been left for dead, sharing their resources with the poor and marginalized, re-telling stories of an overthrown empire, and refusing to commit acts of violence in the name of the empire's military. It didn't take them long to fully realize what Jesus embodied, and that was that love always comes at a cost. Love always offends someone's ego. After all, what did rescuing babies do to the parents who had left them for dead? What did sharing resources with the poor do to the folks who were so used to walking right on by, or worse, those who benefitted from keeping the poor poor? What did respecting the marginalized do to those whose fear had pushed them to the margins in the first place? What did telling stories of an overthrown empire do to those to whom the empire had given power, and what did refusing to serve in the military do to those who had given everything in the name of nationalism? "Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing good, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." Or how about this? What does it do to a religious institution like the BGCT or the WRBA or Baylor University when a church community publicly decides to welcome and affirm those whom the institution has declared unworthy of

affirmation? Now, our suffering may not hold a candle to the suffering and persecution experienced by our brothers and sisters across the globe, but it's a taste of what it means to suffer for the sake of love. It is into this reality that the author of this letter writes:

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Don't fear what they fear, and don't be intimidated them, but in your hearts decide that Christ, that radical love is your authority. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you a reason for your hope; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who abuse you for your good conduct may be put to shame.” Jesus has knocked the sword out of our hand. Our hope requires a nonviolent defense.

Then what does a nonviolent, non-defensive defense look like? In the tradition I came from, our best defenders were folks like Lee Strobel in his book *A Case for Christ*. If you're not familiar with this book, which became a movie last month, by the way, it's the story of an atheistic investigative journalist seeking to prove the gospels historically inaccurate, but in his quest he finds instead scientific, historical, logical proof that Jesus Christ is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Son of God. I mention this not with judgment, but with understanding. I get it. I understand that longing for Enlightenment-endorsed certitude that casts out all doubt. Two plus two equals four, two hydrogens and an oxygen make water, and Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But what if best defense for our hope isn't found in solid historical arguments about Jesus or God or Israel, and what if it doesn't come from an ego-centric need to be right about something? What if it comes from something far deeper, truer? What if our best defense of hope comes from our own experience of God? When we have listened closely to our lives and learned to notice

God's presence, then I believe we have found our best defense and it can be shared in no other way than with kindness and respect. It is in our own stories that we find the best defense of hope, which will look different for each one of us. What can you say about the time you were betrayed by a friend, carried around a grudge for years before swallowing your pride, reconciling, and found that to forgive is better than not forgiving? Is that not your defense for your hope for a world in which reconciliation is the norm? What can you say about the fears you had about people from different places with different skin colors until you finally opened yourself enough to hear their stories and learned that they are just as much children of God as you are? Is that not your defense for your hope for a world of mutual respect? What can you say about that time you heard that song, saw that movie, or watched that sunrise and suddenly felt the transcendent feeling that reality is bigger than your experience of it? Is that not your defense for your hope for a world in which people experience awe and gratitude?

So we have to be willing to defend our hope nonviolently, and the best way to do this is by sharing our own stories and experiences of God. But there is one other thing that bothers me. Peter presupposes that my good deeds will get me in trouble, that I should have my defense ready so that *when* I suffer, not *if*, I will suffer well, in such a way that reconciles people to God. But honestly, I haven't suffered much. The privileged and powerful streams of my tradition have hidden for a long time behind questions of historicity and logical evidence, not bothering much with a hope that would lead them into suffering. But our text does not say to sanctify, set apart reason or logic, as our authority, but Christ - radical love as it was modeled by a man who was tortured and executed for his love. While I was growing up the closest I had ever come to feeling like

I was suffering or being oppressed for doing right was when someone told me that it wasn't okay to make people pray in school, or teach seven day creation as science, or when someone tried to oppress me by saying Happy Holidays rather than Merry Christmas. I've since heard someone say that when you're used to privilege, equality feels like oppression. I'd say that's a pretty good summary of my experience. So we "suffered" at the hands of our evil secular society, struggling to be "in the world but not of it," as they dared to challenge our team's god. Reading this text now evokes far different images. When Peter talks about suffering for doing what is right, I see what congressman and activist John Lewis calls "getting into good trouble, necessary trouble." I see a couple standing at their door between ICE agents and an immigrant family about to be torn apart. I see a college student trying to challenge the subtle xenophobia, racism, or homophobia they hear around their family dinner table. I see folks being shoved into police cars for trying to peacefully bring attention to systemic racial injustice in the United States. I see a congregation choosing fidelity to its call to love well over the protection and endorsement of comfortable institutions. I see folks standing in the current of God's love that is so strong that it continues to flow through suffering or persecution.

So this is where we stand. We have to be willing to defend our hope nonviolently in the midst of suffering, and that the best way to do that is by sharing our own stories and experiences with God. But I also believe that if you've never had to suffer for your love, a thing that Peter presupposes to be the case, then you have to at least ask yourself: why? We live in a cultural moment in which holding to, suffering for, and nonviolently defending our hope is not a luxury but an imperative. Whatever comes next for us, let's heed Peter's call not to fear what the world fears, not to be intimidated. With our swords

dropped to the ground, let us love well together, paying whatever price we must pay, each moved by our own experience of that divine current washing us into the sea of love.