

I PETER AND THE GRAPES OF WRATH

I Peter 1:3-9, 13-25

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on April 26, 2020, the Third Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

For “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” That word is the good news that was announced to you.

Let us pray: “Saint Augustine said: ‘The soul rocks back and forth, onto its back, onto one side and then another, onto its stomach, but every surface is hard; and you [O God] are the only rest.’ May your spirit come upon the words of this sermon that we may find rest for our souls.”

I.

I began my ministry forty years ago as an Associate Pastor for Youth Ministries at First Presbyterian Church, in Wichita Falls, Texas. The city had a little over 100,000 people. It was located two and a half hours northwest of Fort Worth, near the Oklahoma border. On the east side of town, the grass was green but patchy; on the west side, the brown and brush of desert began its vast expanse.

The church I served had around 1200 members, and I was part of a staff of three clergy and one educator called to follow the 28-year ministry of Dr. Earle Crawford, a reserved and scholarly minister who had served that congregation since the era of the Korean War.

The church had a beautiful, modern facility that occupied a city block across from the local state university. It was the most well-maintained church I have ever seen, even exceeding Westminster, which is hard to beat. There were three custodians and a building manager, all full time. They polished the floors once a week, whether they needed them or not. The church had virtually no children or youth; adults came to worship on Sunday morning, listened to a wonderful choir and a thoughtful sermon, and returned home so the custodians could clean the mess they didn't leave. The building was always clean and crisp and...empty. Townspeople dubbed it "the millionaires' mausoleum."

Despite the fact that I was part of a staff called to try to "soil" the building with children and youth after years of their absence, I respected Dr. Crawford's preaching on those occasions when he returned as a guest minister or conducted funerals. His use of language was beautiful. It was vaulted. It was glorious. He was a minister who, when he preached, looked not into the faces of the congregation, but above them, at the back wall; though it was as if he was looking beyond the wall toward the heavens. Though legend had it that after *Brown vs. Board of Education* Dr. Crawford quietly visited business people in the town and asked them to desegregate – to some success I think – his preaching rarely reflected what was going on in the *world*, but rather drew the congregation toward *heaven*. I can still hear him say words I often say at funerals: "In my father's house are many mansions..."¹

II.

The not-very-well-known First Letter of Peter, near the end of the New Testament, reads like Dr. Crawford's sermons – all up here in heaven.

"Christ was destined before the foundation of the world," the letter states.

"Christ was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake," it continues.

"God raised Christ from the dead and gave him glory."

The book opens:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

And then in a long, run-on sentence proclaims:

By his great mercy [God] has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

It is a mouthful, but a wonderful, delectable taste. In First Peter, as with Dr. Crawford, you get the sense that no matter what else is going on in the world, *salvation is secure*. "In my father's house are many mansions."

¹ John 14:2 KJV.

III.

But Wichita Falls was a more *earthly* and *earthy* town than one might sense at first glance from its erstwhile Presbyterian pastor.

- First and foremost, the weather was excruciatingly hot. The week I was ordained marked the beginning of 10 straight days over 110 degrees, 7 of which ranged from 112 to 117. That year 79 days topped 100 degrees, 42 of them in a row.²
- The city was an oil town, that in my four and a half years there went through boom and bust, boom and bust.
- Even though it was a “dry” county, there was hard drinking and harder fighting.
- Larry’s McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*³ was modeled after a ranching family whose several generations were members of the church; the person on whom the character Jaycee was modeled was a middle school youth advisor and her son a member of the youth fellowship. We held confirmation retreats at their family ranch.

If Dr. Crawford focused on heaven, members of the church lived in the *rough and tumble of earth*. The town and church contained the most *colorful cast of characters* among whom I have ever lived or served.

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Despite its glory, or perhaps *because* of it, the First Letter of Peter also turns its attention to the rough and tumble, weal and woe, of life on earth.

...for a little while [the writer says] you have had to suffer various trials...

your faith...more precious than gold...though perishable, is tested by fire...

...prepare your minds for action...

...like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance...

...discipline yourselves...

...live in reverent fear during the time of your exile...

...you have purified your souls by obedience to the truth...

...love one another deeply from the heart...

If Dr. Crawford looked at the back wall when he preached, a least some of his words landed in the hearts and minds of people perched in the pews, and took root in the rough and tumble of unpredictable weather, beautiful but unbearable sun, parched soil, and cycles of boom and bust which for prosperous and poor alike were subject to the whim-full shifts of nature and the price of oil.

² See <https://www.weather.gov/oun/climate-sps-heatwave>. I was ordained at the beginning of this heat wave, on 6/22/1980.

³ Larry McMurtry, *The Last Picture Show* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966). The film, by the same name, was produced by BBS Productions, directed by Peter Bogdanovich, and released in 1971.

The footnote in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible* from which I teach all my classes makes this comment:

A Christian view of time is foundational for I Peter.

- The *past* is the prologue for the Christ event;
- Salvation is secure for the *future*;
- Therefore, the suffering of the *present* can be *endured in hope*.⁴

Even as young as I was then, I saw, in that town, “suffering...endured in hope.”

IV.

Like many of you I read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in high school.⁵ The novel follows the Joad family who like thousands of other tenant farmers uprooted themselves and migrated from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression. They were subject to death, desertion, violence and starvation along the way. I was reminded of this novel in an article published this week not by a literary scholar, but by a foreign policy specialist I assume some of you know, Robert Kaplan.⁶

Kaplan points to the novel's opening:

The dawn came, but no day...Houses were shut tight with cloth wedged around doors and windows, but the dust came in so thinly that it could not be seen in the air, and it settled like pollen on the chair and tables, on the dishes.

Coronavirus?

In their search for survival, the Joad family lose nearly half their members *en route* from Oklahoma to California. Among those who survive, the vast impersonal force of nature leads some to *madness* and others to *heroism*.

Steinbeck writes of Uncle John:

Nearly all the time the barrier of loneliness cut Uncle John off from *people* and from *appetites*. He ate little, drank nothing, and was celibate. But underneath[,] his appetites *swelled into pressures*...Then he would eat of some craved food until he was sick; or would drink jake or whiskey until he was a shaken paralytic with red, wet eyes.

Steinbeck contrasts Uncle John with Ma Joad:

She seemed to know that if she *swayed* the family *shook*, and if she ever deeply *wavered* or *despaired* the family would *fall*, the family *will to function* would be gone.

⁴ David Senior, I Peter 1:6-9n, in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939).

⁶ Robert D. Kaplan, “Shattering Illusions of a Benign World,” in *The Wall Street Journal* 4/17/2020.

The writer of First Peter issues a call to early Christians suffering in exile, a call Ma Joad seemed to hear across the centuries:

...discipline yourselves...

...live in reverent fear during the time of your exile...

...[purify] your souls by obedience to the truth...

...love one another deeply from the heart...

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I am not on social media so sometimes stories come to me after they have become “old news” to many of you. But I was struck by Peggy Noonan’s column⁷ this week describing

...the release of 43 men who lived for a month inside the Braskem petrochemical plant in Marcus Hook, Pa. Braskem produces raw material for face masks and surgical gowns. The workers figured if they got sick it would slow production, so they volunteered to stay in the plant, work long shifts, and sleep on air mattresses. They called it a “live-in.” At one point their families held a drive-by parade so they could wave through the windows.

“We were just happy to be able to help,” Joe Boyce, a shift supervisor...

Is this what the writer of First Peter meant when he wrote: “love one another *deeply... from the heart*”?

By [God’s] great mercy

He has given us a new birth into a living hope

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

And into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]...

Therefore, let us:

...discipline ourselves...

...live in reverent fear during the time of our exile...

...purify our souls by obedience to the truth...

...love one another deeply from the heart...

Amen.

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⁷ Peggy Noonan, “What Comes After the Coronavirus Storm?” *The Wall Street Journal* 4/23/2020.