

Episode IV: A New Hope

We have dealt with a lot of heavy ideas and issues in the last several weeks. During Lent, we have confronted the darkness that is so prevalent in our world. We have looked into the darkness of temptation and addiction, of grief and the lack of compassion. We have considered the darkness of skepticism, disbelief and prejudice, of death and fear, of violence. But we have come through the Lenten darkness into the light of Easter. We will be celebrating the resurrection in the season of Easter for the next several weeks and the Easter season should indeed be a celebration. Until the day of Pentecost, the lectionary epistle each Sunday is I Peter, a letter from the old fisherman to several churches in Asia Minor. This letter gave rise to the saying, “If Paul is the Apostle of Grace and John the Apostle of Love, then Peter is the Apostle of Hope.” Exploring a letter that is full of hope seems very appropriate to me for this season and I’m going to begin that exploration this morning with some thoughts that I hope you will find hopeful, light-hearted and perhaps just a little silly. I do have a serious end in mind, though: how we can build on our hope in Christ for the future to impact our world here and now.

So, here’s the part that you may find just a little silly. As I read and re-read the first chapter of I Peter this week, I became convinced that it abounded in ideas and images that we most often find nowadays in science fiction. Some of you may have already guessed I had something like this in mind from the title of this sermon. The movie known to most of us as “Star Wars” had a subtitle: “Episode IV – A New Hope.” Other writers and preachers have made the connection between works of science fiction and the New Testament, as well – I’m not the only one with this goofy idea. A quick check at Amazon.com reveals such titles as: [The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#), by Gabriel McKee; [The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope and the Force](#), by John C. McDowell; [Star Wars Jesus - A spiritual commentary on the reality of the Force](#), by Caleb Grimes; [Christian Wisdom of the Jedi Masters](#), by Seattle-based author Dick Staub; and, [Finding God in a Galaxy Far, Far Away: A Spiritual Exploration of the Star Wars Saga](#), by Timothy Paul Jones. I’ve also made reference in one of my previous sermons to a sermon I read on the ‘Net entitled “Prime Directive,” by Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey, in which she used a concept from my beloved “Star Trek” to emphasize the importance for Christians of Jesus’ command that we love one another. So my comparison of I Peter 1 may be a little silly, but I’ve at least got plenty of company in my quirky thinking.

But enough preamble. What about those fantastic images? To begin with, Peter’s letter is addressed, “to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” Those may have been well-known regions in the First Century A.D., but in the Twenty-first Century, they are all but unknown. Now they have an exotic sound to them. They might as well be Alpha Centauri, Tatooine, or Vulcan. We begin with an image of humanity scattered to far places, exiled from their true home. But there is a mysterious word of hope for these exiles. Their all-powerful deity has given them a “new birth,” a “living hope” – sounds like Episode IV of the Star Wars saga. Their great Savior-hero has returned from the dead (now, there’s a science fiction plot point if ever I heard it) and has brought them “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” – something that will last beyond centuries – kept for them “in heaven” -- a place far beyond the stars – kept for them who are “being protected by the power of God.” Peter might as well have said, “May the Force be with you.” Peter goes on to say that the salvation of the exiles will be revealed “in the last time,” or at the end of the universe.

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Peter and Silvanus, his secretary, or to use a 50-cent seminary word, his amanuensis, go on to say a number of other things about the hero who brings this salvation, things that might be right out of any number of science fiction books or movies. This leader is apparently supernaturally-gifted with invisibility: “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him.” The hero has an extra-terrestrial sidekick: “the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.” The hero is a time traveler, like the Doctor from BBC’s “Doctor Who,” or perhaps an immortal: “He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.” Sounding like Morpheus in “The Matrix” talking about the One, Peter writes about, “the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.” If you’ve read the Foundation series by Isaac Asimov, you may think of Hari Seldon and his psycho-historians when you hear Peter’s proclamation, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you.” And, finally, there is another “Star Wars” theme as Peter writes, “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.” In other words, the loyal Jedi may suffer terrible losses, but the Alliance will ultimately overthrow the evil Empire.

Now, I’ve been a little fanciful with this quick overview of I Peter 1 through the rather distorted, fun-house lens of science fiction. I hope that I’ve amused or even enlightened you and not offended you with my admittedly off-beat hermeneutic. But as we take a more serious look at this chapter, I think we’ll find that there really are some real-life connections here for us, some things that both comfort and challenge us, even if, to the casual observer they seem, to borrow a phrase, “Stranger Than Fiction.”

To begin with, we who are followers of Christ know the disorientation of exile, the feeling that we’re not really living in our proper place. Richard Jensen, Professor Emeritus of Homiletics at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, says that this is the result of a certain displacement in time rather than in place. As we celebrate Easter and the resurrection of Jesus, we remember that the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated in that mighty act but that the Kingdom is not yet fulfilled. As Jensen puts it, “As Easter people we live between the NOW and the NOT YET. Easter people live between the times!” We were quite right, earlier this morning, to sing the words of Richard Avery and Donald Marsh: “My new life has begun... God’s in charge... the past is over and gone!” For us, these sentiments are quite true. But they are not yet true for the whole world. Many of our neighbors have not experienced the new life that the Risen Christ offers them. There are too many places in the world where human beings have not allowed God to be in charge, with tragic results. For us, who have embraced the forgiveness of God through Christ which wipes out all of our misdeeds and brokenness, the past is indeed over and gone. But all around us, people labor under the burdens of their past, shackled to things they long to forget, to consequences and addictions they cannot escape. I would suggest that it is the ones who are not yet a part of the Beloved Community who are the true exiles but as long as the world is under the sway of those who deny God’s Kingdom, then it is we, the Easter people, who will feel displaced.

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Just one example of the broken, unredeemed nature of our society is the current state of the economy. The bad news rolls in day after day. The gap between rich and poor grows, the middle class shrinks. Isn't it good that we have "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading"? Pastor Dan Bollerud of Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church in Anchorage, Alaska, writes, "I have watched the market take away a good hunk of money this year. I have watched the cost of filling the tank make me glad I bought a Civic. My neighbors have dropped the price of their house \$200G and it is still on the market after a year. Jesus calls us to put our faith in him, to store our treasures in heaven where there is no recession, no war profiteers to wreck the economy for everyone else. There is only Jesus, my interest in him always pays beyond my expectations."

There are other adversities at hand, as well. Some scholars feel that I Peter was written to Christians facing deadly persecution under one of the Roman emperors whose statue some of us saw yesterday; Nero, perhaps, or Diocletian. We, of course, do not face anything like that, although there are Christians around the world whose faith puts them in very real danger. No, the adversities that we face from others are far more subtle, far more insidious. How difficult it can be to resist the idols of money, beauty and power when society reinforces their messages day after day after day. How easy it is to just try to fit in, get along, rather than being set apart for God, holy in the true sense of the word. Peter saw it coming; "do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance," he wrote. Unthinking adherence to the ways of the world rather than the ways of Christ will slowly obscure our faith and the image of God in us, more precious than gold. If we resist, we will be mocked, left out, left behind. If we see those adversities for what they are, then we will understand what we sang earlier, words that echo Peter: "the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine."

We will also encounter more truly fiery trials in the pathways of our lives; adversities not brought on by uncaring society but the big, inhuman adversities of life: sickness of body and mind or premature death. It will be harder to see how those circumstances might "result in praise and glory," as Peter promises. It is especially then that we will find our hope in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. There is nothing that we can experience that he did not. The fact that God raised him from the dead is a promise to us, our "living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Our struggles are not meaningless; our past is not meaningless. Dr. Robert Linthicum writes on this passage: "Time is full of meaning. All that happened in Israel and even in the Gentile world before the coming of Christ happened as prologue and preparation for Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Likewise, the future is secure for Christians because our eternal relationship with God is guaranteed through the cross and resurrection of Christ. That is the hope in which all Christians live. Consequently, because our future as the Church is guaranteed and our past was preparatory for Christ's coming, then the only thing that matters is the present. If the present demands of us suffering, harassment and persecution from an unbelieving Gentile world, we can cope with that suffering because of the hope we have been given through Christ's resurrection (which is a foretaste of our resurrection)."

I think it's significant that Dr. Linthicum writes, "our future as the Church is guaranteed." It takes the focus off of our lives and destinies as individuals and reminds us that we reach our best destiny as members of a community, a community to which we bear certain responsibilities. It's

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a good link to one of Peter's final points in this chapter. "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." Peter knew what it meant to be loved. In the course of just a few days, he had seen his beloved Rabbi tenderly take his tough fisherman's feet and wash them, even over Peter's protests. He had seen that same Master go to the cross, on Peter's behalf, even as Peter had denied him. And he had experienced the loving forgiveness of the Risen One who gently but persistently asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter understood the teaching of Jesus; that the greatest love possible was for a person to be ready to die for a friend. He had seen Jesus die for him and for his brother and for their friends and for a whole world that did not even know Jesus.

To return for a moment to my earlier, more light-hearted theme, it is a mark of some of our most loved science fiction stories and films that the theme of the ultimate love for others, even to the point of death, permeates them as well. Who among us who has seen that first "Star Wars" movie can forget the sight of Obi Wan Kenobi sacrificing himself to Darth Vader so that his friends can escape? Or the end of the original trilogy when that same Darth Vader redeems himself in a fight to the death with the evil Emperor to save Luke Skywalker? And since I'm the guy in the pulpit this morning, I've got to cite the Vulcan, Spock, who taught the philosophy, "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one," and then gave his life to save his shipmates. At the end of that movie, "The Wrath of Khan," Spock's dear friend, James Kirk, is reflecting on Spock's death and what it accomplished when another friend asks him, "How do you feel?" "Young. I feel young," is his reply. Did the screenwriter have in mind the words of I Peter, referring to the accomplishments of Jesus' death: "You have been born anew"?

OK, I know it's pretty silly to compare the Holy Bible with books and movies that are barely above the quality level of pulp but I think it means something that these ideas have penetrated so deeply into our popular culture. As much as our culture pushes against the light and embraces the darkness, the darkness cannot overcome the light; the Kingdom of God keeps on breaking through. Our subversive Good News just keeps on creeping in around the edges, popping up where it is least expected. Ultimately, the hope we have in Christ is irresistible. In a world where so much is unknown, where truth seems to shift from day to day, where we cannot tell the difference sometimes between truth and fiction, the Good News of Jesus and the hope that we have because of Him is steady, sure and strong. It is our inheritance, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. Best of all, it isn't meant for just one of us, but for all of us, for the whole community, the whole world. We have a new hope better than anything George Lucas could dream up. Don't you think it's worth sharing all the way across the galaxy?