

GETTING OUT OF THE CAVE

1 Peter 3:14-15

Years ago I went into our bank to make a deposit. At the time our bank was doing everything it could to get people to do their banking through ATM machines and electronically. One of the ways they encouraged this was by not having enough people working at the bank facility to handle the customers who showed up. I was dismayed to encounter a line about the length of the Great Wall of China. As you can imagine the customers, including me, were not thrilled that the bank was doing a good impersonation of the DMV. But I resolved to be patient. There were only two young women working as tellers trying to deal with all those customers and I could see that they were feeling rather harried and harassed. When my turn finally came I stepped up to the counter and saw that my teller was wearing a sticker that said, “I made a difference.” I asked, “How did you make a difference?” It was like I flipped a switch. She suddenly brightened and a big smile broke out on her face. She told me she had given money to the United Way and explained how that was going to make a difference. It was obvious that in all the pressure of that day the thing that brought her joy was doing something that she felt would actually make a difference for someone in this world.

That’s true of all of us. We want to make a difference in the lives of other people. No one wants to feel like they have navigated through this world with no effect whatsoever on anyone else. We also know people who have an effect but it is a negative one. We don’t want that either. But how are we going to have the kind of positive effect on people that we’d like? We’ve seen in the past weeks that we need to know God, live with joy, seek to serve other people and impact them with good deeds. Today I want to show you something else we can and must do to make a difference in the lives of others. In fact, it can make the biggest difference of all.

We’re going to get a glimpse of this thing in 1 Peter 3:14-15, but as we begin I want to tell you something I’d like you to keep in the back of your mind. Not long ago Laurie and I were at Bill and Barbara Farrington’s house and Bill showed us his home theater system. He has a cool 3D television just a little smaller than the screens at Edwards Cinema. Along with it he has a very nice surround sound system. He explained it to us then put a movie in to demonstrate it. It was very cool. We could hear sounds in different parts of the room and we could feel in our

gut the base from the subwoofer. Laurie and I went away from our visit saying, “we’ve got to get ourselves one of those.” He shared his enthusiasm and his experience about the thing, and we caught it from him. There is an important lesson there I want you to remember as we go through this passage this morning.

DO NOT FEAR

The people to whom this letter was written had reason to be afraid. In verse 13 Peter had asked, “**Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?**” You would think the answer to that would be no one, but in the case of Peter’s audience that was not necessarily so. In verse 14 Peter says, “**But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.**” There was a possibility that those poor followers of Jesus might be full of grace and good deeds and still find themselves persecuted. Persecution often has nothing to do with the way a person lives.

In fact this problem of being badly mistreated is a common theme in this letter. In 2:20-21 Peter wrote, “**How is it to your credit if you receive a beating or do wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this end you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.**” In 4:12 Peter wrote, “**Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you.**” In verse 16 he said, “**If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed but praise God that you bear that name.**” I conclude that those people had it pretty rough. It is hardly reassuring to be repeatedly told that no matter how good you are you may end up being abused for your good works.

Those people had particular reason to fear, but they have company. We also have reason to fear. Fear is a part of life in this world. It is a constant in the lives of most people. In fact the world is dominated by fear. How much are people affected by worry? Most people would love to be free of worry even if only for a little while, but they never really are. What is at the core of anxiety and worry? It is fear. We are afraid that something bad is going to happen to us.

We fear pain, humiliation, rejection, loss, disappointment, failure, embarrassment, even the words or critical opinions of other people. The whole world fears. When I started my first position as a pastor Jimmy Carter was the President. In other words, I’ve been a pastor for a long time. Despite that on the weekends I still have dreams that speak of anxiety. Just this weekend I had a typical one in which I was preaching but my notes were in total disarray and I could make no sense of them. I

stumbled and bumbled around as people got annoyed with my incompetence. On occasion I will have a dream in which it is Sunday morning and only about 8 people show up for church. Those dreams speak of heightened anxiety, in other words, fear, even after all these years. We all have our fears.

We play the “what if?” game, and that leads to all manner of worry. What if that headache is actually a tumor? What if I lose my job? What if our entire economy collapses in a sea of government red ink? What if my child gets some serious illness? What if the housing market plummets and I lose my home? What if terrorists are able to gain control of a nuclear device and set it off in our city? What if my child rejects Jesus? What if the “Big One” hits, the earthquake that has so long been predicted for California? What if I never get married? The “what ifs” are endless and they bring with them an avalanche of fear. People all around us in their own ways are coping with fear. They are afraid! God calls us in this verse to be different. He calls on us to not be afraid of what they fear. Here is a way Christians are to stand out. We are to live without the domination of fear.

There are times when telling you to not be afraid doesn’t help much. One that comes to my mind is when I’m in the dentist chair. I have an appointment to see the dentist tomorrow. I have a long standing problem with the dentist. I’m just there for a cleaning. It’s not that bad. But the whole time I am tense. I tell myself there’s no reason to be afraid and that I should relax. And for a few seconds I do. But not for long. Quickly I find I’m all tensed up fearing some awful pain. It’s not real rational.

Do not be afraid is easy to say, not always easy to do. But everyone would like to be able to do it. All of us desire an antidote to fear. And as I said, if we really lived without fear it would be obvious. People would love to have the freedom from fear and would wonder how we have that. So the question is how do we do this? How do we obey the command to not be afraid? Are we just supposed to avoid all fear and anxiety producing situations?

You’ve probably seen people parasailing, maybe you’ve even done it. They put a parachute on a person who is attached to a speedboat. Then the boat takes off and as the parachute fills with air they individual rises up into the air as much as 800 feet high. I am not fond of heights. To me it looks horrifying. So how do I deal with my fear of that kind of thing? Real easy – I just don’t do it. Problem solved. But that approach cannot work with most of our fears and worries. If we tried that approach we could do nothing but lock ourselves in a sterile room some place, and

even that wouldn't work. So how do we obey this command? This passage shows us the answer to fear, but it is a surprising answer.

SET APART CHRIST AS LORD

The answer to fear according to this verse is not to talk yourself out of it or to simply put up a brave front and pretend not to be afraid, it is to set apart Christ as Lord. But what does that mean and how does it help with fear?

This is actually a reference to Isaiah 8:12-14 where the prophet recorded this message from God: **“Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary.”**

God's people were threatened by an enemy alliance and they decided they needed help from a foreign power. They appealed for help from that power even though Isaiah warned them not to. They claimed that Isaiah was actually conspiring with their enemies to keep them from getting help. But all he was really doing was telling them what God said, which was that they should depend on him. So God told Isaiah, “don't fear what they fear. Instead regard the Lord Almighty as holy. Recognize that he is Almighty, greater than your enemies or the foreign power, and that what you most need to do is obey him and worship him. Your safety is in him, not in some foreign power who will corrupt you and eventually turn on you.”

Would God's people believe their God is powerful and able to rule in this world, would they trust and obey him? When Peter cited that passage he was making a profound statement. He was saying, “The Jesus you believe in is that Almighty Lord. He has power over all the things that the people of this world fear. He has power even over those who persecute you. So don't be afraid of them, because though they may do you harm, somehow God is using that to work his plan in this world. Trust in his power and his plan.

When we live in fear we cast a vote against God's trustworthiness. Here's one of my favorite dodges: I'm not living in fear, I'm just kind of stressed. Uh huh. Look up stress in the dictionary. Among meanings such as emphasis and accent you will find, “physical, mental or emotional strain or tension: worry.” In other words, I'm worried. When we live in fear and anxiety we say we don't believe God cares about us or if he does it doesn't matter because he's unable to help us because he's

too weak. When we set apart Christ as Lord we are stating that we believe we can trust God and we are so confident that's true that we're not afraid.

Ultimately Peter's message is that if we do that we will have a source of hope and strength even when facing hardship or pain or persecution. In other words, we will have hope that goes beyond the immediate situation. Imagine that you are on that airplane and are tight-knuckling your way through turbulence. Maybe it's that kind of turbulence that involves the aircraft suddenly experiencing those sickening drops in which it feels like you are falling out of the sky. Then suppose that to your surprise you are invited to go sit in the cockpit and watch the pilots fly the plane. You strap in a seat in the cockpit right behind the pilots. The plane is still going through heavy turbulence. In fact, maybe it even gets worse. But you watch the pilots calmly monitoring the instruments and flying the plane not the least bit perturbed by what is happening. You realize that while it might be unpleasant and make you a little uneasy the pilots aren't worried and that the plane is doing exactly what they expect. Your fears are calmed. You'd appreciate it if the bouncing around would calm down, but you are no longer worried because you can see that all is under control. So it is when we set apart Christ as Lord. When we regard him as our loving Lord who is calmly flying the universe despite the turbulence we might be experiencing we can relax and be at peace.

We tend to give our attention to the wrong things. Back in 1997 Reeve Lindbergh, the youngest daughter of Charles Lindbergh, was invited to the Air and Space Museum in Washington to give the annual Lindbergh address in commemoration of her father's historic flight across the Atlantic. The museum officials invited her to come early before the facility opened so she could get a close look at *The Spirit of St. Louis* that her father flew. It is suspended from the building's ceiling. So that morning she and her young son, Ben, got in the basket of a cherry picker and were raised up until the plane was within reach, some 20 feet above the floor. She had never touched the plane before, so that morning for the first time she put her hand on the door handle. Tears welled up in her eyes and she reverently whispered to her son, "Oh, Ben, isn't this amazing?" He said, "Yeah, I've never been in a cherry picker before." Talk about adventures in missing the big picture. That's just what we do. We forget the bigger picture that God is quite real, quite in control, and always seeking to do good to us. That's what we put our hope in and that's what will enable us to not be afraid.

Laurie was once deathly afraid of spiders. Over the years her fear has metamorphosed into loathing. She still fears them, but her way of dealing with that

is to go to war with them. Now when she sees one instead of panicking, she looks for weapons. However, I recall an incident years ago when she spotted a big black spider at the top of the wall above our bed. I was tasked with assassinating it but it was too high for me to reach. I tried to use a hockey stick to assault the creature but I only succeeded in knocking it off the wall. It fell to the floor and scurried under our bed. Laurie said, "I'm not getting in bed with that thing down there. I can't sleep knowing it's there." She didn't feel safe, so she couldn't rest. Big lesson. If we don't feel safe we will never be at rest. We'll be afraid. When we feel safe in God, then we will be at rest and we will have what our whole world is looking for. Our hope is in the fact that Almighty God loves us and is working for our good in everything that happens in our lives.

BE READY TO EXPLAIN

Peter knew very well if we are not defeated by fear but have hope it is going to make an impact. You can imagine the effect it would have when people abused and persecuted those early Christians and instead of seeing anger, frustration, fear and defeat in them they saw calm, peace, hope and grace. What a powerful impact that would make. Peter tells us in verse 15 that we need to always be ready to explain why we are at peace and have hope when no one else does. In his commentary on 1 Peter D. Edmond Hiebert wrote that this verse means we should have "a personal readiness to explain to opponents the nature of the hope that dominates our lives as Christians...we should be...never unprepared, never unwilling, never timid to respond."

There's an important message there. It's a wonderful, godly thing when we live with trust and in our faith in God have peace, hope and joy in life. We know this is what God wants from us. But this verse tells us that it should not stop there. We are also called by God to help others find the peace and hope that we have. We are to tell them about what we have. Implicit in this command is the truth that we are called to bring the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ to other people. This has always been part of being a part of God's people. This is a big part of making a difference in this world.

Way back in the Old Testament at Mt. Sinai where God established his special relationship with Israel that point was clearly made. In Exodus 19:6 God said to Israel, "**you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**" Israel was called by God to be a nation of priests. What did a priest do? He was supposed to represent God to the people, and the people to God. When a priest got focused on

gratifying and enriching himself instead of being the intermediary between the people and God he was violating his call and God's command for his life.

Unfortunately that is exactly what happened with Israel. They also quickly forgot all about being priests and pursued gratifying themselves. When God's people think their lives are about pursuing their own interests they fail in their most important role in life. Isaiah 26:18 tells the story. Isaiah was confessing on behalf of the people of Israel, "**We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world.**"

My daughter, Carissa, is famous for several sayings. One of her classics happened after a Thanksgiving meal in which we had all feasted to the point of pain and beyond. Carissa pronounced, "I think I'm going to have a food baby." She was so full she felt pregnant, only not with a child but with food. Well Israel was also pregnant. Only when it came time to deliver no baby came out. They had not a food baby but an air baby. Pregnancy is a process that is supposed to end with a living child. Being a priest is a process that is supposed to produce bringing the good news of hope and salvation to the world. But for Israel that process was as futile as a pregnant woman going through the 9 month process and giving birth to nothing but air.

Israel completely missed their calling so that by the time of Messiah they believed they became unclean just by coming into contact with non-Jews. It's pretty hard to see how they were going to represent God and bring salvation to people they considered untouchable.

Now the mantle has been passed. It is the church, followers of Jesus Christ, who have been given the task of bringing the news of life through Christ to the world. We have been given this crucial role! Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:9, "**You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**" **We** are now the priesthood, the ones called to tell people about God and the life and hope he wants us to have.

Oh, but you mean guys like you, right Rick? Men of the cloth. Pastors. Preachers. That's your job, right? You're the one who is a priest representing God to the world, right? Well, as I read that verse it appears that this is the job of **everyone** who has been called out of darkness into Christ's light. If you have put your faith

in Christ and have found life in him, you have become part of the royal priesthood. You can't delegate it to paid religious guys like me. It's your role!

You meet someone new and they ask, "tell me about yourself. What do you do?" You likely will answer that you are a sales rep, or an engineer, or a homemaker, or a businessman, or a lawyer or a student, whatever your job happens to be. And that would be accurate, to a point. ***But it is not what is truest of you.*** You are a priest. That's your first job, to represent God to the world, to bring salvation to them. I can prove that it is your first job. Suppose you are a high level manager for the Widget Corporation. One Friday you are called into see the boss. He says, "I've got bad news. As you know Widget is being bought out by XYZ Corporation and they have decided that our division is redundant. We are all being laid off immediately." Suddenly you are out of work. You are no longer a business executive. You are unemployed. And let's further suppose that as the economy craters even further you cannot find another managerial job and you end up making French Fries at In-N-Out. Someone asks if you are still a manager. Your answer is no. But are you still a priest? Yes, you are. In fact, since you are making French Fries you could be called a friar. Just kidding. Laurie was a stay-at-home mom for a couple of decades. Now our kids are grown and her career as stay-at-home mom is over. But when she was doing that job she was first and foremost a priest, and now that she is no longer playing the full time mom role she is still a priest. I was a pastor for many years, but I was a priest before I was a pastor. And for a brief time a couple of years ago I wasn't a pastor, but I was still a priest.

Zac Levi, star of the TV series *Chuck* and the animated movie *Tangled*, is an actor but more than that he is a priest of Jesus Christ. Albert Pujols is an absurdly well paid first baseman for the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, but more than that, he is a priest of Jesus Christ. In a few years he will no longer be a baseball player, but he will still be a priest of Jesus Christ. Jeremy Lin of the New York Knicks is a professional basketball player, but he is first a priest of Jesus Christ. When he is no longer in the NBA he will still be a priest.

Yeah, we got it. We're supposed to be ready to tell people about hope in Jesus Christ. We're supposed to see that as our role in this world. But why is that such a big deal? We all know that in our culture it is a big faux pas to try to convert others to your religion. Why should we try?

Suppose for a moment that you are with a group of people who are lost in a cave. If you've ever been in a large cave system like the one in Carlsbad, New Mexico you

will know that being lost in the dark in a cave would be terrifying. You are all hanging on to each other to keep from being alone, but it's dark and you can't see where you are going. You are all stumbling around with no idea how to get out. At one point you stop to rest. You think you see a faint glimmer. You walk away from the group and follow it and to your immense relief you find light. You follow the light to an opening to the outside. You break out into glorious sunshine and fresh air. You are free of the cave and its oppressive darkness. What do you do at that point? Do you go on your merry way, rejoicing in the day and in your good fortune and hoping your friends make it out somehow? Or do you find some way to mark your trail then go back into the cave to find your friends and show them the way out? Could you live with yourself if you didn't go back? Suppose you didn't but somehow your friends made it out without your help. How is it going to be when you face them later and they know that you refused to go back for them?

This business of being a priest is not about building up our group. It's not about making ourselves more sure that we must have the truth because other people agree with us. It's about going back in the cave to save people lost in the darkness and bringing them into freedom and light! It's about giving them hope and the life they so badly need and want to have.

We sometimes sing a song that contains some of the words of Psalm 84:10. “**Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.**” That says you can think of all the best moments of your life. Whatever they may be, living in God's presence is better than the best of them. Do you believe that? If you do, being a priest becomes the easiest role in the world. I don't have difficulty telling people about things I love. I have to restrain myself from talking to other people about my wife, about Carissa, Toby and our newest family member, Anna. You want to talk vacation places, I don't find it hard to wax eloquent about our favorite spot. I mentioned as I began that Bill Farrington was enthusiastic about his surround sound system in his house and his enthusiasm infected Laurie and me. If living in God's presence is the best thing in life as Psalm 84:10 says it won't be hard for us to be sales reps for that particular product.

If you don't feel that having Christ as your Lord and having his life in you is better than everything else in this world, then this priest role is going to be a tough sell. You simply don't believe in the product. But we all know that if what the Bible says is reliable two things are true: Having Christ as Lord is critical for this life because it provides the security and the meaning in life that we all are desperate

for, and second, it provides the security for eternity that we need. In other words the eternal destiny of people is at stake!

Penn Jillette, illusionist who is part of the Penn and Teller team that has been headlining in Vegas for years, is an atheist. But he tells about a gracious Christian businessman who gave him a Bible as a gift. He goes on to say this, “I don’t respect people who do not proselytize...If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life...and you think that...it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward... uh how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize them? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?” He is not a Christian, but he sees the issue very clearly.

Most of us have difficulty with this priestly role. We don’t have confidence that we know the right thing to say. We’re afraid we’re going to turn people off. We may even be afraid of rejection, of what people might think of us. How do we get past these obstacles? Just a few weeks ago we had the privilege of having Micah and Alycia Vandover talk to us about telling others about Jesus. I loved their passion and their energy, didn’t you? Their stories were funny at times and powerful at others. It was exciting and challenging. But I know that a lot of you came away inspired, but also saying, “I could never do that! That’s just not me.”

I know many of you were saying that because, to be honest, I said that. But there is good news for us. We can still be priests. There are some things we need to remember that can help us. We cannot convert anyone. We aren’t called to be convertors, we are called to be witnesses. A witness just tells what he knows. Ephesians 2:5 says God “**made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.**” That means the people you encounter who don’t know Christ are spiritually dead. They can no more respond to spiritual stimuli than physically dead people can respond to physical stimuli. Go down to the cemetery and offer them a delicious piece of Laurie’s incredible apple pie. What will happen? Nothing. They can’t smell the wonderful aroma from the pie nor be enticed by how great it looks. They’re dead! Or maybe bring a powerful boom box and put your favorite music in it, turn it on and crank it up until it’s so loud that it rattles your bones. Then ask the people in the graves, “How do you like this song?” What do you think will happen? Nothing. They’re dead. They can’t respond! Big principle there. Dead people cannot respond!

That means you can offer a person who is spiritually dead the most appealing, desirable things in the spiritual realm, and you'll have exactly the same response. Nothing. The only way that person will ever respond will be if the Spirit of God makes them come to life spiritually. Your cleverness or brilliant stratagems or powerful arguments will never accomplish the task. That means the pressure is off us. All we need to do is let them see that we have hope and take every opportunity to tell them about it. We tell what we're excited about. It's up to God to change their hearts. So the most important thing we can do for people is pray for them!

Another encouragement that Micah and Alycia reminded us was that we don't always have to give people the whole presentation of our faith. God is so powerful he can use little things to impact people. Laurie is a great example of this. We were out on a walk and we encountered an older man with whom we had a brief conversation. In it he talked about some of the upsetting things going on in the world. Laurie just said, "Isn't it great to know that God loves us and that he's in control of all of it?" It completely caught the guy off guard. That was all she said, but it left that man with a reminder that someone has some peace and hope that he doesn't know anything about. It was a little seed planted.

God is powerful beyond our comprehension. He can take any small thing we say or do and use it in the life of another person. In his book, *The Christian Atheist* Craig Groeschel tells the story of going to see a man in the hospital and failing to share Christ with him. That man died that night. He felt he had failed badly. But one story he told that helped me is a reminder that even a little thing can make a difference. At one point in his life he used to wear a little cross pin on his shirts. He bought a lot of them because every time someone commented on his he'd give it to them as a gift. One time he was at a 7-11 store and the female clerk complimented his pin. He immediately offered it to her. She tried to refuse at first, but eventually she accepted the little gift. Years later after church a woman stopped him in the lobby of their building and said she wanted to thank him. She said, "You probably don't remember me, but years ago you gave me this." She showed him the pin. Then she said, "When you offered this to me my life couldn't have been any worse. I didn't feel worthy of such a gift. But through your gift God showed me that he still loved me. My life is different today because of what you did for me."

Here's this week's challenge for you: ask God each day to give you a chance to say something to someone about the hope that is in you. Then keep your eyes and heart open. You don't have to preach the sermon on the mount. Perhaps it will simply be

one sentence. Remember you are a priest. Do you believe in your product? Then simply be anxious to let others know the way out of the cave.