**Scripture Lesson: 1 Peter 1:3-9 A Living Hope**

3 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,4and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,5who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.6In this you rejoice,\* even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,7so 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 honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.8Although 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,9for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

**Sermon:  God Blessed the Mess**

Growing up in my household we had a tradition in the Advent season and that was on a Sunday evening, my father and I would sit down to watch Christmas Vacation. We enjoyed watching it because the whole premise is Clark Griswold, played by Chevy Chase, will stop at nothing to provide the perfect Christmas for his family. From the decorations to the food, to even the gifts, he goes all out to bring to realization this picture he had in his mind of what a perfect Christmas should be. And as the movie goes on the humor is found in the truth that there is *no* such thing as a perfect Christmas. There just isn’t because life when it is real is messy, is unpredictable, and often times disturbing. So, the tree gets destroyed by cats and dogs, the food is ruined, unexpected visitors show up, and the Christmas bonus you planned on is *not* what you had hoped for.

I believe the reason my father enjoyed this movie so much was because being a pastor he saw the real-life imperfections of the season too. In his care to his parishioners during this time of year, he counseled more families whose relationships were being torn apart; he held more funerals; and of course, all the while trying to deal with the pressures to make each and every Sunday service special so those attending could come get excited, about the anticipation of receiving the Christ child. This movie was an outlet for him, a way for him to laugh through the stress and mess of the season. And for me that was just as good as the movie, seeing my father getting the laughter therapy that we knew he so strongly needed.

How about you? How are you holding out with the pressures of this season to make things perfect? Find the perfect gift, the perfect tree, the perfect food, all the while living in a world that is far from perfect.

There’s unemployment, there’s sickness, there’s suffering, and war. Life is messy, so why are we so consumed with the idea of making Christmas a picture-perfect celebration? I mean especially when we take into consideration that the night Jesus was born, there was a whole lotta mess around him: He was born in a manger, he was laid to rest with the animals. Consider all that brought- waste, germs, smells that attracts bugs and critters. His parents were young, inexperienced. And soon they would all have to flee and become refuges in Africa because another mess continued, the mess of a paranoid dictator named King Herod who was after him and sadly massacred the innocent children of Judea. In all that though, there was hope. The hope was, in the midst of pain, of suffering, of death, God showed up, right? God did in Jesus. And we, as his followers are called to do the same. To be the living hope as Peter says, hope that gives life amidst the mess.

Now in looking at this passage from 1 Peter we need to know that the Apostle Peter was writing to first century Christians whose lives were pretty messy. They were messy due to what they believed, what their faith taught them, and that was how to live in a way that was counter to what society encouraged them to be or do.

He starts out, *3 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,4and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,* Now when Peter writes of *a new birth* meaning being born again, the image is the reader has chosen to start over, the reader chose to leave behind what was, and is now choosing to give their life to serving Christ, in which they will *receive an inheritance that is kept in heaven* he says, meaning it’s not now, it’s not yet, but will be. And even though he says *5who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* That does not mean this is going to be easy- in fact it’s going to be messy.

He continues, *even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,7so 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 honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.8*What that means is even though the believer may be struggling to do everything right, wrong is still going to show up and the best thing a born again Christian can do is be proactive with their faith, that is continuing to actively seek God’s purpose and presence in any situation, even when it may not seem sensible or right, even when it may seem we are being tested by fire, because through that fire God will show up and we will be refined by the hope of Jesus Christ. In other words, Peter is saying, God can use our painful experiences to be seeds of hope. Hope that offers life through the revelation of Jesus.

In the 1840’s Dr. Edmund Sears served as a Unitarian pastor in Wayland, Massachusetts. And as a pastor, he believed every Christian should be doing what Peter wrote of, of being a living hope. Sears believed that every Christian should be involved in reaching out and helping the lost, the suffering, the poor. And no one else in his community lived that out as well as Dr. Sears. He was a force of care in that community, constantly reaching out to those in need. The problem was, no matter what he did, it never did seem that it would ever be enough. By Christmas 1849 Dr. Sears had become disgruntled and disturbed by the continuing unmet needs of the suffering so that when it came time to write his Christmas sermon, he struggled. How could he write of something that was to be filled with joy and inspiration when he was lacking the joy himself due to all the pain and suffering he saw and ministered to? That’s when he re-read the Christmas story and as he did he recognized the truth behind the story - how God came and blessed the world in the midst of its mess. It wasn’t a perfect situation for anyone. Mary a virgin, Joseph confused, a demanding evil king pursuing them, and the only ones around to even hear of the birth of the Savior king were the shepherds working the third shift, in other words the lowest of the low in society’s totem pole. Yet in the midst of all that mess, God came, God came upon a midnight clear, and the angels sang a song.

And so, he penned these words for a Christmas poem that would become our beloved Christmas song.

1. It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,

from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:

"Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all-gracious King."

The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

1. Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled,

and still their heavenly music floats *o'er all the weary world.*

*above its sad and lowly plains,* they bend on hovering wing,

and ever o'er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.

Now listen to how Dr. Sears reflects upon reality with this verse:

1. And ye, *beneath life's crushing load,* whose forms are *bending low,*

*who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,*

look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.

*O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!*

Isn’t that beautiful? Now here is the challenge friends:

1. For lo! the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old,

when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold

when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,

*and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.*

To this day the song haunts and challenges us- to sing back to the heaven the song we know, the song we chose to be born into, the song of love and mercy and joy amidst the mess that surrounds us, the song of living hope through God’s salvation for all in Jesus.

As Christmas comes towards us, may we not be so focused on the perfections we dream of, but rather may we be real, and allow the reality of a living hope lead us in pursuing and receiving God through it all.

Because life is messy, but God will show up, God has always shown up, and friends, may we allow God to show up through us.

Let us pray: God you never intended for us to handle life’s unexpected turns by ourselves. You never intended for us to suffer on our own. And through your Son we know that, and we claim that. Help us to live it now and especially in the weeks to come. May our song be your song, may our praise be your praise, and may our hope always be in you and with you as living proof of your great love. Amen.