

**May 17, 2020 | Journey & Sanctuary worship services**

**TEXT: [1 Peter 3:13–16a, 9](#)**

**TITLE: Saying What Needs to be Said**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Imagine someone saying to you: *Covid-19 is no worse than the flu*. As your blood pressure rises, you begin by citing statistics about how a 6-month flu season may have 35,000 fatalities, while so far in America, in just 4 months, we've had over 2½ times as many Covid-19 deaths; how each week there are 10–20x more deaths from the coronavirus than for any week during flu season; and while we have vaccines for flu, we have no medical antidotes against this current viral epidemic. You might pause then to see how the person responds to this information or you could simply keep plowing ahead in a diatribe that probably doesn't change their mind but makes you feel better for having argued your case so emphatically.

I recognize that it makes a difference whether the person who says *Covid-19 is no worse than the flu* is standing right in front of you or has posted that statement on social media. If it is a Facebook or Instagram post, our responses will likely be longer and more aggressive. We'll list every statistic we can think of and link to every article that reinforces our position. But if this conversation happens in person, we will likely stop at some point to see what the other person has to say in response. We will look at their body-language (Do they seem upset or are my words sinking in?). We will listen to their tone of voice (Are they getting angry or are they calmly able to continue a rational discussion?). Those two dynamics are missing in Twitter rants and Facebook tirades, which is why social media outlets convince almost no one, but only serve as a place to vent our emotions to a largely sympathetic crowd who, thanks to algorithms, have been preselected to agree with most of whatever we want to say.

1 Peter 3 verse 15 tells us this: *Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting*. That sounds like we are being advised to speak our minds and plunge into moral debates with others. We've discussed one such argument—Covid-19 vs. the flu; let's consider a second: *Should America's priority right now be healing our ravaged environment or healing our ravaged economy?* Just a few months ago, our attention was riveted by the wildfires devastating whole sections of Australia. Millions and millions of animals were killed and it warned us how deadly climate change actually is. And sadly, the current flawed administration in Washington has rolled back at least 98 environmental protection laws—everything from lowering fuel efficiency standards and undermining the Endangered Species Act to weakening the Clean Water Act and approving drilling in wildlife refuge areas. The Covid-19 pandemic reinforces the message of the Green New Deal and of environmental activists like Greta Thunberg: We need to act now for the health of our planet, because we are all in this together.

Ravaged environment vs. ravaged economy: Once again, our answer will be more nuanced if the person posing the question is standing right before us and is a small business owner who can't open his hardware store, but for the last 8 weeks Home

Depot has been allowed to sell the same products, or a hairdresser who runs her own salon but can't pay the rent because she's been closed since mid-March. Idealists might argue that there is a way to re-open our economy that cares both for people and the environment, but we also know that it is hard to focus on long-term environmental goals when the short-term needs of our neighbors and friends, like paying bills and getting food on the table, aren't being met.

Listen to a bit more of I Peter 3 verse 15: *Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.* This bible verse isn't teaching us how to win a debate; it is encouraging us to be willing to give an accounting for the hope that is within us—to show by our words and deeds what gets us up in the morning and what we truly believe about God and faith and life on earth. That is a far different conversation than just winning an argument over politics or disease prevention. It's a conversation that works harder to engage the other person than to convince them.

We've been told that America is fatally divided. But the things impacting the shops and restaurants in Point Breeze, Homewood and East Liberty are not so different from the dynamics at play in Cranberry, Canonsburg or Beaver County. We are all facing issues that are personal—that involve self-identity and how to provide for loved ones. What is needed is not another re-tweeted polemic, but rather a word of hope and of faith. For goodness sake, we are still in the season of Easter—with its language of resurrection, of light pushing back darkness and life overcoming death. The scripture we read today said *“Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.”* Basically that means tell our faith story. Atheism has trouble telling a story since in that worldview there is only chance, fate and luck with no happy ending. Faith is a powerful story about a divine love, power and mercy greater than us, and about a hope that sustains us even in the darkest valleys and hardest times.

An Italian doctor working in northern Italy through the worst days of the pandemic was asked how he kept going. He replied by quoting Pope John Paul II, who said *“Sometimes it is necessary that the heroic becomes daily and the daily becomes heroic.”* Giving an account of what we believe always starts with clearly seeing the person in front of you and speaking in a way that they can hear. It means speaking honestly about hope—a hope that we have experienced in our lives; a hope that is part of our vocabulary as followers of a risen Christ; a hope that points us toward God's own future and God's promise to be with us always.

Again I Peter 3 verses 15 and 16 guide us in what we are to do. *Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.* Gentleness and reverence: Two descriptive words that it is important to keep in the forefront as we respond to other's questions.

When Beth and I were flying home from Spain, the young boy in the seat in front of us turned around at one point and said to me, “When you were as young as I was, did you

have things like 8-track cassette players? We have one at home that still works!” Somewhat taken aback, I chatted with him for a while about cassette players and record players. When he turned back around, I leaned over to Beth and asked, “Why was he asking us about cassette players? Does he think we’re old?” To which she wisely replied, “No, dear, he thinks you’re old.”

Faith conversations need to be gentle and reverent because today they often involve two special groups of people—people who have poor experiences of the church and people who have no experience with the church. In our recent new member class, we are blessed to have 23 people who are coming to ELPC as new friends and members—and their faith journeys have been quite diverse. Some are lifelong churchgoers, even lifelong Presbyterians. Some stepped away from churches because of toxic behaviors, discriminatory doctrines, and acts of abuse. A few never had a strong relationship with any church and will come to us seeking to be baptized and make their first ever profession of faith. Almost all of these new members came to ELPC after checking us out online through our website. Many came because of conversations with friends or some of you that shared about our church’s commitment to inclusion and justice. I celebrate the way God has been at work in their lives and the gifts they bring to our congregation. Yet conversations with these new members and with so many people beloved by God yet outside our church walls requires us to take to heart Peter’s instructions: that we must find ways to tell our story, model Christian kindness and forbearance, speak and act for hope even in times of despair and trouble, and always, always do so with gentleness and reverence.

Will such efforts always be successful? Will such approaches protect us from abuse, rejection, or ridicule? No. Even our best efforts will not always work, resolve every argument, or heal all that divides us. But hope plunges us into the struggle for victories over evil that are possible right now in the world, in the church, and in our individual lives. Hope is real and God-given, and with it we have the courage to contend against all opposition, however invincible it may seem, for the sake of the new world and new humanity promised by God in Christ that is at the heart of the story of our faith.<sup>1</sup>

I’ll close with a passage spoken in a sermon long ago by St. Augustine and quoted by author Kathleen Norris: *Let us sing alleluia here on earth while we still live in anxiety, so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security...Let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. Sing as wayfarers do – sing, but continue your journey. Sing, but keep going.*<sup>2</sup>

To that I would add: Sing—give an account to all who ask that all may profit from your conversation. Sing of your hope—sing with gentleness and reverence. Sing, and continue your journey.

AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Presbyterian Church of the United States, Declaration of Faith, excerpt.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, New York, 1998; Sermon 256 of St. Augustine.