

Over this weekend of Memorial Day all of us have the opportunity, in our own way, to recall and remember those who departed from what they had imagined their lives would be like because of war or conflict in the world and their desire to preserve and protect the freedoms to which the nation aspires. Some of us recall specific people whom we knew, husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, cousins, grandsons, who departed to face danger. Some of them did not return home and we mourn their deaths still; all of them were marked by their service. In more recent years, some of us have seen those previously mentioned as well as mothers, and daughters and sisters, and granddaughters face same and similar challenges. As part of our remembering let us pray for the peace of the world in order that all those who today serve in places of danger can come home, resuming their lives, reunited with their loved ones. Let us honor the courage and sacrifices made on our behalf by committing our lives to the way of Jesus Christ that we might share healing, reconciliation and so aspire to express real and lasting justice.

April 15 has come and gone for another year –actually April 18 was Tax Day this year! Some of us had to pay something more to the IRS for taxes; some of us have received or await our refund check; some filed an extension putting off the work till October; some live under the cloud of the dreaded audit.

For most of us the thought of going through such an audit is not pleasant, having to dig out all those receipts, records, statements; getting them in the correct order; living with the feeling that someone doesn't quite believe what we have declared and that they are determined to rake through every detail of our lives. In such a context the idea of an audit is not something we relish.

We might however view today's Scripture readings as providing a standard against which we might audit at least three aspects of our faith. So let us take the plunge, let's be willing to hear the witness of the Scriptures and reflect on how we measure up, seeking to come to an appreciation of where we are in our faith and where God calls us forward.

The first aspect of our faith to which we are pointed this morning is **OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF GOD**. In 1 Peter 3 we hear an echo of the church's first creed: "Jesus is Lord", in these words, "In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." The word the writer of First Peter uses for Lord is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word that is used for the name of God in the Old Testament. The use of this word, God, Lord, to express the nature of Jesus reveals the early church's developing theology: Jesus and God were one. To which we can and should compare the words of Jesus in John 14 - "I am in the Father."

The statement, "Jesus is Lord" is the earliest Christian confession. Beginning with this most basic Affirmation of Faith, and continuing in all the creeds and confessions of the Church down through the centuries, it is the faith of the Church that Jesus is divine, that in the person of Jesus the Word of God has come in the flesh. That Jesus is God in human vesture, walking the earth, talking, eating, laughing, crying, sharing, bearing both the nature of our humanity and the very nature of God.

In Jesus the transcendent, holy, glorious, powerful God comes in vulnerability. In Jesus we encounter at one and the same time the transcendent God, the out there, above and beyond us all, the eternal God and the imminent God – God here, God now. As we encounter the imminent God, the God present with us, and present with all people in all time, we are at the same time encountering the Holy God who is the Lord. In Jesus we encounter and are encountered, we embrace and are embraced by the Lord God, in the now.

In 1 Peter we hear how Jesus suffered, that Jesus died bearing in His life, death and resurrection, the sins of many, taking upon Himself the full weight of the world's despair and rebellion in order to turn that world and return the world to God. The Jesus who suffered and died was the transcendent God, but the Jesus who suffered and died was also a certain Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth. It was this Jesus, the carpenter turned Rabbi who hung on the tree but this Jesus, who died, was not just this particular human but in this Jesus the divine also died, God succumbed to a real, human death. One result of this actual human-divine death was that the word of God's Hope was carried even into hell, bringing transformation even there, for where God is hell is banished and heaven breaks in!

The resurrection of Jesus was and is the sign that the death of Jesus was fully real, for there can be no resurrection without a death; the resurrection was and is also the sign that God, having risked it all for our sake, triumphed in love. In the resurrection, God, God in the now, is forever with us and for us and for the world, sharing love and life and hope and peace. The Jesus who lived, the Jesus who died, the Jesus who descended even unto hell, the Jesus who rose again from the dead – is the Jesus who is God in the flesh.

All of this matters deeply. It matters deeply because it is in the divine-human life lived, in the divine-human death endured and the life of God and the life of a human restored in resurrection that our hope as Christian people resides. Only God could close the gap between Creator and Creature, and Jesus, who shared fully our nature and God's nature the gap was closed once and for all.

The second topic for our faith audit that these Scripture passages helps us with is **OUR EXPERIENCES OF LIFE AND FAITH**. It is the affirmation of these verses in 1 Peter that God is with us even as we suffer. That God is with us when we suffer because of doing bad and that God is with us when we suffer for doing what is good.

God in the now, in the now of our lives, in the now of our sufferings is the God who in Jesus suffered all suffering. This God is always closest to us in times of suffering. This God is the God who weeps as we weep, who cries as we cry, who sighs in groans we cannot even imagine. God in the now is God with us in our suffering.

When we take these two thoughts together: Our understanding of the nature of the very being God, and of how God connects directly with our experiences of life, faith and suffering we discover the third aspect about which Peter wrote which we can apply in our faith audit today **THE HOPE WHICH WE HOLD AND IN WHICH WE LIVE**.

Before we get too much further we need to seek to be as clear as possible about the meaning of the word, "hope". We need to hear the word as we are meant to hear it.

Sometimes, hearing a word correctly can be quite a challenge – I once received a list of useful Southern words that someone told me would be very helpful given my strange accent and vocabulary. Included in this list of Southern words was the word, rats.

It came with the following example of its usage: A school teacher in America's southernmost state: Hawaii, had her class study the War between the States. She showed her class the movie "Gettysburg". The class wondered why people were fighting for their "rats(!)". The answer, of course, is obvious: Southerners have very friendly "rats(!)", in fact, you could almost say that we have some downright civil "rats(!)".

Hope is not wishful thinking; it is not the power of positive thinking; it is not wishing that things will somehow turn out all right - Hope, resides in God;

Hope is God's power at work in us and in the world; Hope is not only about the ends of things, in the sense that we hope things will come out the way God says they will; Hope is about the beginning of things, setting us out on a new road.

The active nature of hope underlies the injunction in 1 Peter to, "Always be ready to make your defense when anyone challenges you to justify the hope which is in you." God in the now is the God of Hope.

The hope which God offers us is not that we will be able to make enough money to send our kids to college and later retire in ease?

It is not limited to the hope that we might live to a ripe, old age?

It is not exhausted with the hope for peace in our time and for a better tomorrow for your grandchildren? God's hope calls us to go on through life and death in the company of the risen Lord.

God in the now is the God who lived among us in Jesus Christ, who is with us in our suffering, who has made us people of His hope. The reality of our faith audit is that we don't need to be worried or anxious, because we have a friend, an advocate, at the divine "IRS". The Spirit of Jesus is our "Advocate." Jesus will speak on our behalf. Jesus will be our friend in court. One who has been here and knows what it's like to be human. The "Advocate" will help us through difficult times. The Advocate takes our side. It must have been a comforting thought for the early Christians as they faced persecution, it continues to be a comforting thought: As Paul said, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" God in the now is the God who loves us, of this we can be certain. God's love for us in Jesus is an unconditional love.

Having received the gift of such a love - we can depart from living merely for ourselves and live for God. Jesus said - love me as you keep my commandments.

People of God, God is in the now of your life and faith; God is in the now of your joys and sorrows, your pain and struggles; your poverty, your wealth; your youth, your age; your weaknesses, your strengths; your dreams, your nightmares. God in the now is for the world and for all people. Jesus, God in the now is for you, with you, in you, and calls each and all of you forward into faithful, hopeful, joyful living.
Amen