

# **“Always be ready to make your defense”**

**Psalm 66:8-20 and 1 Peter 3:13-22**

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**Sixth Sunday of Easter**

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Our second reading for today is from a book (or a letter) which we probably don't read very much. These tiny books at the end of the New Testament tend to be ignored or neglected. We have a hard time finding them when we're asked to turn to them.

And that's too bad, as you'll hear when I read these verses. There is a great deal here, and in fact I encourage you in your devotional reading to take one of these letters and read it straight through. They're not terribly long. And my guess is that you will find lots of challenging devotional material.

Let's see what we find here in the First Letter of Peter, chapter 3, beginning with verse 13...

**<sup>13</sup> Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup> And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I want to talk with you for a little while this morning about **“defending the faith,”** what Peter calls **“making a defense,”** and what is often referred to in Christian circles as **“apologetics.”**

That reading, which we just heard from the First Letter of Peter, is a famous one. There are actually several good sermons in that reading – several topics which would be fun and interesting to explore this morning. In fact, maybe questions were raised in your minds as I read.

But rather than doing a bad job with several topics today, I want to try my best to do a good job with just one of those topics – and that topic is **“defending the faith.”**

In verse 15, Peter writes, **“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.”**

I like that little twist at the end, don't you? Be ready. Have your sword in hand. Be like a soldier prepared for combat. And oh, by the way, whatever you do, do it **“with gentleness and reverence.”**

The Bible can be so exasperating at times!

Let's look together at what this means. And I want to begin with a story that you are probably tired of hearing, and I am sorry about that, but it's the only place I know to begin.

I grew up in a Christian family, and we lived in a Christian community. Everyone I knew, when I was a child, was a Christian. Or it seemed to me that everyone was. The people who lived next to us – the Blackwells – were an exception. They were Catholic, and they went to church on Saturday night, which we thought was really weird, although we never said that to them.

But everyone else I knew seemed to be doing things the right way. Everyone else was Reformed, and evangelical, and Protestant.

So, when I looked around in church on Sunday mornings, I saw my school principal singing in the choir. I saw my dentist and his family a few rows over. All (or most) the adults in my world had university degrees, sometimes graduate degrees, *and they were believers.*

It never occurred to me that my faith needed a defense. Believing in God, believing in his Son, Jesus Christ, never seemed particularly odd to me. And I mention all of this to say that I've never had much of an interest in apologetics.

Why would I? I had no need for it.

But moving to Europe, I have to say, has changed all of that. It has given me a new perspective.

What happens when you live in a culture where the predominant view of the world is not Christian? What happens when you attend a university where the predominant view of the world is not Christian? What happens when you live and work and go to school in a culture where there is open hostility to what you believe, where belief in God seems at best odd, out-of-date, not very modern and sophisticated, where you sometimes feel foolish to say that you go to church?

From many of you, I have heard stories about subtle – and at times not-so-subtle – put-downs because of what you believe. I have heard stories about a reluctance to be too public with your faith.

The people in my village – the ones I have come to know – are certainly aware of what I do and where I work and what I believe. And I have not encountered anything that would count as persecution, but there is a definite hesitation when the subject comes up. There is a noticeable silence when Susan and I invite a neighbor to come along with us to the church picnic.

I have to say, this is new to me. And to be honest, it doesn't feel like persecution, but as we learned at the all-church retreat last year, there's a short distance between the subtle forms and the more serious variety. As history has demonstrated, we can get there in no time at all.

And so, interestingly, verses like the ones I read for you today have become much more meaningful. I now hear them differently. I pay attention in a way that I never did before.

Peter knows what we experience. He has experienced it too. We don't know exactly what form the persecution took when this letter was written. It depends in a way on when you date the letter. If the letter was written very late in the first century, during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, let's say, then the persecution was probably significant, not terrifying, that was still to come, but it was definitely moving in that direction.

Anyway, as I spend more and more time in this culture, other parts of the Bible have come alive in ways that I never expected. And let me give you a couple of examples.

Luke tells us in the first verses of his gospel that his writing is based on careful historical research. He tells us right at the beginning that he's going to present an accurate record of the origins of Christianity.

He's not writing history, he's writing a defense of the faith. These words, he tells us at the beginning, are meant to persuade.

You know, we sometimes think that the gospel writers were writing brief histories of Jesus' life, and in a sense they were, but they had much bigger concerns in mind. They were making a case for something. They were arguing a point of view. By the time you finished reading their account, they wanted you to say yes or no, to accept the truth of it or to walk away.

In the second volume of what is really a two-volume work, known as the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells *the classic story* of apologetics – namely, the apostle Paul's address on Mars Hill in the ancient city of Athens, chapter 17.

Do you remember this story?

Paul's first words here are ... remarkable. They are so skillful. He is engaging his hearers on their terms.

He says, **“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”**

You and I are not going to debate the leading philosophers of the day as Paul did – or at least most of us here are not going to do that – but we have here in these words a guide about how to speak with our friends and our co-workers.

These are not debating tips, this is a model of how to do it.

The story in Acts tells us that Paul was actually quite disturbed as he walked along in the city of Athens. His first reaction was to be appalled. He had never seen so many idols. And it bothered him. At the core, his faith was monotheistic.

But in his presentation, as you heard, he was calm and rational. He took something from their world. In other words, he begins with common ground. And then he made Christianity seem to fit with what they believed to be true. He didn't speak down to them. On the contrary, he was respectful and engaging.

But the point, you see, is this: He did it. He spoke. He accepted the challenge, knowing that some in the crowd would laugh, as the end of the story confirms. Some of them were openly contemptuous, as he probably knew they would be.

Anyway, for years, Paul's address on the Areopagus, to a non-Jewish audience, has been the paradigm or the model for apologetics. This is how you do it.

But Luke is not alone. Anyone who reads John's gospel should see the same principle at work. To any Gentile or Hellenistic reader, the term "Logos" would have conjured up Platonic or Stoic notions of the universal Reason, capital R, that was believed to govern the cosmos – and was thought to operate in the rational mind of every human being.

Sorry for the Greek philosophy lesson, but what John was doing was precisely what Paul did. He was finding common ground, a language that his readers could understand.

And then – this is interesting – he subtly changed it or modified it. He said that this "Logos" was personal, that it was not an abstract idea, that it was in fact God's son, and that it had taken on human flesh.

Well, that was a completely new way of thinking about God and God's relationship to human beings.

And – here's the point – it was intentional. As he sat down to write his gospel, he was thinking, **"How can I put this so that my audience – who are Greek speakers – will understand and be willing to listen?"**

I don't think I realized until these last few years how pervasive this theme is in the New Testament. When a topic is raised once in the Bible, it gets my attention, of course, but when something like apologetics becomes a theme, when you see it on every page, it demands more of a response.

This is really important.

The Greek word that Peter uses here – *apologia*, which by the way gives us the English word "apology" – *apologia* occurs 17 times in the New Testament, in both a noun and a verb form.

And I think it's interesting that the word in its original use had a legal connotation. An *apologia* is what you would give if you were accused of a crime. You would have your opportunity in court to defend to yourself or to give your response to the charges against you.

And so, early Christians took this word – because they often felt as though they had to provide a defense – and they expanded its meaning. Apologetics (in the modern sense) is what you do when you explain or defend your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It's your testimony, your legal defense – in the face of charges against you.

Down through the centuries there have been a lot of apologists for the faith. Every time the church was under attack, every time faith needed a defense, men and women of intellectual substance would emerge

who would provide an explanation, or a well-thought-out defense. And over the centuries these people have served the church well.

One apologist I want to mention this morning, one among many, was Francis Schaeffer, who is known to several people in this congregation. Some of you knew him personally.

Francis Schaeffer was an American evangelical Christian. Like me he was a Presbyterian pastor. And he is best remembered for starting a Christian community in Switzerland called L'Abri, where young people from all over the world, in the 1960s and early 1970s, could come and talk about faith in a setting like the Areopagus or Mars Hill.

Schaeffer was not a scholar in the academic sense, but he was well trained. And he had a gift for engaging the questions of young adults who were searching for answers – not easy answers, but rigorous ones. He demonstrated for the young adults who came to see him, backpacking across Europe, that you didn't have to be dim-witted to be a Christian.

The first time I served as a student pastor in a church – this was way back in 1977 – my church used a film series at evening worship that had been created by Schaeffer about art history, of all things. The camera would follow Schaeffer in his lederhosen on a hike in Alps, and he would explain the Christian view of things.

The title, which some of you will recognize, was *How Shall We Then Live?*

What Schaeffer tried to do was to show how Christians could engage the world around us, how we could be part of the conversation, how we could critique the prevailing views of the day. It was quite an ambitious project!

I know of course what has been written about Schaeffer since he died, and it's unfortunate, I'll leave it at that, but I don't think any of that diminishes his work or the example that he left for us in the field of apologetics.

There need to be places in our lives where we can ask tough questions.

For some of us, the last time we asked a tough question was in confirmation class, unless we were too scared or intimidated to do it even there. But there needs to be a place or a forum where ideas are discussed, and where Christians are allowed to take a stand.

In a sermon a couple of years ago, I apparently said something like “**no one was ever argued into the kingdom of heaven.**” I don't remember anymore the context in which I said it, but a few of you remember it and have not forgotten.

I still believe that's true, although I would probably want to say it differently. I think the inner work of the holy Spirit in our conversions, for example, should not be discounted. But obviously there is a place for discussion and argument and careful thinking.

We are not going to win every argument, nor is winning arguments what Peter asks us to do. We are not going to convert every non-believer who challenges us about our faith, but once again that is not what Peter asks us to do.

What Peter asks us to do – and he asks us to do it in a gentle and reverent way – what Peter asks us to do is to be ready to say what we believe, to give our reasons for believing what we do.

And if the rest of the New Testament is any guide – and I think it is – we should be thoughtful about how we do it. We should read a book now and then. We should take a class. We should try our best to find common ground with people around us. We should find language that other people will understand.

And then, we should make our case, knowing that not everyone will be convinced.

When I was a teenager, I remember hearing something that I'm sure you have heard before: **“If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”**

And I remember that that question got my attention. As a young believer, I was determined to live my life so that there would be no question about what I believed.

But what I have in mind this morning – and what Peter has laid out in front of us – is a different kind of challenge. I still think you and I should live exemplary lives. I still think personal behavior and morals and lifestyle and all of that counts for a great deal. People should know without even asking that there is something different about us.

But the challenge from Peter to us today is different, and it comes down to this: Are you ready to say why you believe it? Are you ready to give a defense?