

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Hills
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“When Going Gets Tough: Maintaining Love”
1 Peter 4:7-11

We’ve got two weeks left in this series on the letter of 1 Peter. We’ve been calling the series “When Going Gets Tough,” and again many thanks to Pastor Rachel for all her work in putting this series together. Wanted to offer a quick primer on the series that will follow it. Two weeks from today, we’ll be shifting gears and going all the way back to the beginning of the Bible and taking a really close look, verse by verse, at one of the most pivotal chapters in all of Scripture, Genesis chapter 3, commonly known as The Fall. A particular thanks to Pastor Mark in putting this series together. That’s something we’re going to try to do at least once a year, a close reading of a shorter text over multiple weeks, but preaching that way is tricky, so thank you Mark for putting all of this together.

For today in 1 Peter, we come to a bit of a turn in the letter. For much of the first three chapters, Peter’s focus has been on how God’s chosen people, the church, should live and remain faithful within a world that mistreats them, for they were facing persecution endorsed by the emperor himself. But now the letter takes a turn and asks, “Okay, how do we treat each other now?” Will you pray with me?

Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

So Frances sometimes tells me I’m a hoarder, because if there’s a deal out there on something, some kind of nonperishable, I’m prone to say, “Let’s stock up, while it’s on sale. Because it doesn’t go bad.” If there’s a sale on paper goods, let’s stock up on paper goods. If there’s a sale on toiletries, let’s stock up on toiletries. If there’s a sale on diapers, let’s stock up on diapers, doubly so in the near future with baby #2 due to get here next month, so much so that we have a comical amount of Aquaphor, to the point that if you saw it, you would think, “What are these people doing to their son that they need this much diaper rash cream?”

I almost got in trouble with it a few months back. This was when the pandemic lockdown was just about to hit, and there were runs on things like hand sanitizer, bleach, disinfectant spray. And those made sense, because with the threat of the virus, we suddenly were going to use more of that than we used to. But then other things started to get scarce. Things like toilet paper. In a scare due to a respiratory disease, something to do with, you know, breathing, we were in a panic stocking up on toilet paper. And because you started hearing that toilet paper was scarce, for some people that meant, if you ever came across some, you snatched it up, got as much as you could, because you didn’t know the next time you’d see it again. Again, this is due to a respiratory disease. Didn’t make sense.

But as a response to it, there started to be a bit of public shaming to those who had cleared the shelves of toilet paper, taking more than they needed and thereby depriving others of having any at all. And it was all because some folks were worried about running out of toilet paper, and being faced with the terrible alternative.

But not at the Howell household. We were stocked up—more to the point, we were stocked up before the pandemic hit because at some point there was a sale on toilet paper so we got a bunch of it. That’s where it almost got me into trouble.

I forget the exact setting, but somehow Frances was in a conversation with some folks, and the topic of toilet paper comes up, because what else do people talk about, and she mentioned that we had lots—not like mountains of it, but you know, one of those huge cases of it that you get all at once—and I said, Frances you gotta make sure they know that we had all that toilet paper beforehand. It wasn’t panic; it wasn’t opportunism like the guy down in Chattanooga who bought all these bottles of hand sanitizer and then tried to sell them at ridiculous prices. It was just a good deal on toilet paper long before it was scarce, so we stocked up.

Now, why have we spent the past four minutes talking about toilet paper? You might be wondering that very question right now. This is why: because crisis brings out sides of people that you otherwise may not see.

Peter is talking to the church about the sides of themselves that they might show, making them ask, what side of you will people see?

V. 7 says, “The end of all things is near; therefore, be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.”

“The end of all things is near,” that’s end of the world talk. That’s just alarmism. That’s like saying the sky is falling. Peter’s like the guy on the street corner, scraggly beard and hoarse voice with a sign hanging off of him saying, “The end is near.” That’s not something you listen to, is it?

For the earliest Christians, the end of all things was thought of differently than we would likely think of it today. Namely, many believed that the end, that is, Christ’s return in power and glory was coming any day now. There was no time to lose; he’s coming back; and we have work to do before he does.

It’s like if you’re housesitting for someone, and you have on your calendar that the homeowners are coming back not on a certain day but at some point during the next week. At any time during that week, you had to be ready. You wouldn’t just wait until you hear the car pull into the driveway and then frantically clean up around the place—not that I know that from personal experience—you had to have things in order, because you simply didn’t know exactly when it would happen.

That’s how the earliest church thought about Christ’s return, and we can see that reflected in some of the early letters. But then as time went on, the church had to make sense of why it hadn’t happened yet—you can even see some of that in the difference between 1 Peter and 2 Peter. 1 Peter speaks of the end, as we see now, like it’s right around the corner, whereas 2 Peter, written a bit later, tried to make sense of why Christ hadn’t come back yet.

The point is, when Peter says, “The end of all things is near,” it’s not sounding the alarm; it’s a call to preparation. Christ is coming back, and you have to be ready. “Be serious,” he says, “And discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.”

There are some who interpret “being ready” or “being prepared” in a very different way. Recently I learned about this subculture of people of those preparing for the end of the world. They’re called “preppers,” as in, they’re preparing for the collapse of modern society as we know it, and according to one source, as much as 1% of the population in the US identifies as part of this “prepper” subculture. In some ways it’s similar to the fallout bunkers from decades past, but it seems it goes much further now. Now, it’s not just a dug out shelter in someone’s

backyard. It's big business. And this isn't knocking it; I was just fascinated to learn about the extremes it went to.

One example: twelve years ago a developer named Larry Hall bought from the government some land in the middle of Kansas. The land itself wasn't all that remarkable, but it just so happened to include an abandoned ballistic missile silo. So Hall does exactly what you or I would do if we owned an abandoned missile silo: he built some condos. Turned it into an inverted skyscraper of apartments, going 15 stories down, sold them, and equipped the facility so that any of the owners could go five years underground.

The owners add their own flavor to it, with one potential resident, who lived in Manhattan, actually filming the view from her apartment in New York for a year so that if she had to move into her apartment, she would project that view onto the wall of her underground apartment.

I honestly wish I could've heard the sales pitch for this place. "Ride out the apocalypse in style in this 2 bed, 2 bath bungalow, fully updated with new granite countertops, set in the lovely plains of rural Kansas, and we do mean actually *in* the plains. Previous owners worked for the government, and has an acceptable level of radiation."

That's one way you could respond to "The end of all things." Similar impulse as clearing the shelves of toilet paper and hand sanitizer. Stock up. Dig in. Get ready for the long haul.

But that's not how Peter tells the church to do it. Right after he says, "The end of all things is near," "be serious," and "discipline yourselves," right when you might expect Peter to say, "It's time to dig in, everyone for themselves," he doesn't. Instead, this is what he tells them to do.

Starting in v. 8, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies." "Maintain constant love," "be hospitable," "serve one another," these aren't instructions to look out for yourself first. These are instructions to give of yourself first. However you've been gifted, whatever you've been entrusted with, use it for others' benefit and well-being.

And it's not just for the sake of the church. These instructions speak of loving each other, serving each other, but the purpose isn't to protect the community of the church. It's to be a sign to everyone else who sees it, to testify that a different power is at work. Peter writes in v. 11, "so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen." These commands to love and serve, to give of yourself as the end of all things comes near, aren't for the purpose of preserving the church, it's to testify to the world of the glory of God, of the power of God, that the self-giving sacrificial power of God stands over and against every other power that would seek to preserve itself, against every instinct we might have to look out for ourselves first.

These days, we might have that temptation. These days it might feel like the sky is falling. Though I haven't heard too much talk of "the end is near," it could seem like so much is in upheaval, whether it be ongoing concern from the pandemic, or worry about a second wave starting, or protests after the death of George Floyd, or the news out of Atlanta of the death of Rayshard Brooks, that you might find yourself thinking, can I just click skip on 2020 and come back in easier times? Can I just hide away? If you find yourself thinking along those lines, what Peter is saying to us is, "What if you didn't?" What if you didn't clock out? What if, when so

much is uncertain, when so much weighs upon the world, the first question we ask is not, how do I get through this? What if you didn't go with your first instinct to look out for yourself first and instead asked, "How can I give of myself? How can I show love, how can I offer and serve in the manner I have been most blessed?"

It's hard to do. That's why Peter uses that word, "maintain"—*maintain* constant love for one another. It's hard to do, because love is hard. It's a lot easier to retreat. A lot harder to give of yourself, and to keep giving of yourself. But that's the command we have been given, and more importantly the model we have been given, for when Christ had every opportunity to gather power unto himself, to save his own skin, he didn't. And instead, he gave of himself.

But be encouraged, friends, for there are those of us already doing this.

Just this past week, I visited Lynda and Eldridge Kennedy at their home, and it's part of a new thing we're doing, kind of an abbreviated worship service at folks' front doors—talk to one of Deacons Christin Myers or Pastor Rachel if you'd like to hear more about it—but that's not why I bring it up. I bring it up because Lynda shared a little about how this season has been for her. For health reasons, she and Eldridge have had to more or less stay in isolation, and she shared just how much she missed singing in the choir on Sunday mornings and being with the 4-5 year olds during Sunday School, but then she shared just how much it had meant to her how those within the choir and other friends in the church had kept reaching out to her, checking in on her. But I'd add that it wasn't just about how others were showing love to her; it's also about how she herself had been reaching out to others in the church.

And that's how it could end up. Not just receiving love but showing it, how one feeds the other. It's how this cycle of sky is falling, circle the wagons, everyone for themselves is broken. It's broken when at some point a people says, "There's another way, a way of sacrifice, a way of peace, a way of justice, a way of love," and it's not for self-preservation but it's to demonstrate that another power is at work in the world.

And so friends, and you yourselves may be tempted to see all the uncertainty and upheaval right now and respond by retreating, disengaging, by hunkering down, by leveraging whatever resources and abilities you have to look out for yourself first, I ask you, as Peter does, in the name of Christ and to the glory of God, "What if you didn't?"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**