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“Be prepared to
give reasons for
the **hope** that
is within you...”

PEGGY SENDER PARSONS
to North Pacific Yearly Meeting, July 26, 2002



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in my certainty. And when I am in that place I do some pretty crazy things. I jump out of boats. I try to build clubhouses for the Glory of God. And sometimes I pull out my sword and try to fight for what I think is right. But then eventually the glory fades and I take my eyes off my source and see that the wind is against me, and I notice that my Master is not fighting the fight I think He should be fighting. And then I despair, and deny that I know this man. I deny that any knowing is possible, and I have to go back to what I was doing before, and I get the same result as before—which is a whole lot of nothing.

And then, a really amazing thing happens. Love shows up and cooks me breakfast. I discover that I am known. All of me: the impulses and foolishness, the truth and bravery, the sleepiness and skullduggery. I am known and I am loved, and all is well, and I am given good work to do. I have Hope.

So this I do know. When I am stuck in my certainty I am lost. And when I am stuck in my uncertainty I am equally lost. But when I surrender to the possibility of Love, and do what love asks of me, then all things are possible.

I have Hope, but not because of anything I know. I have Hope because I am known completely, and because the One who knows me completely, loves me completely.

INTRODUCTION

This plenary address was given at North Pacific Yearly Meeting's annual gathering in Corvallis, Oregon, in July, 2002. We have edited it lightly, trying to maintain the sense of a talk rather than an essay or article.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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to emphasize that he has gone back to the very beginning, we find him again fishing with the others, all night, and catching nothing. And again Jesus shows up, and he can't resist teasing them a bit: "Boys, have you caught nothing?" He says. "Try the other side of the boat!" And at once Peter is again jumping out of boats, splashing this time for the shore, where his master, with fish already cooking, feeds him breakfast. And they have the most amazing chat. "Peter, my solid rock, do you love me?" "Lord, you know that I love you." "Then feed my little lambs." Then again Jesus asks, "Peter, son of Jonah the reluctant prophet, do you love me?" And our boy says emphatically, as always, "You know that I love you." And Jesus says, "Take care of my flock." And then he asks him for the third time, "Peter, my friend, do you really love me?" And The Rock is shaken again, for he hears in the three questions the echo of his three denials, and he knows that there is no proof of his love that he can offer, but being the speaker of truth that he is, he takes the only holdable ground and says, "You KNOW all things; you KNOW that I love you." And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

And he does feed the sheep for thirty years or more. And at times he does it brilliantly and at times he screws up as he always did. But his love for his Master is his constant, and it remains stable. It builds a church and it lands him eventually in a Neronian prison. A hellhole of a place, a cesspool of a prison with no light or air, and it is from this place that he writes to us: "Be prepared in all places and in all times to explain your hope."

Friends, I am a lot like Peter. I think I know a lot of stuff. I think that my ideas are pretty good. And sometimes I get stuck

foundations. The fight he had been expecting is not happening. He is ready for glorious battle, but not for surrender. Most of the other disciples run for safety, and are not seen for days. Peter follows along and stays as close as he can in the courtyards of the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate. And when someone identifies him and says, “You belong to Him,” Peter looks at the master of words, the rabbi never beaten in debate, who now stands silent and mocked by illiterate fools when the powerful men withdraw and leave him to the cruelty of the guards, and he says, “I do not know that man” — that silent man. And he looks at the man who healed the sick and told the wind and waves to behave; now helpless, beaten, and seemingly powerless, and he earnestly says again, “I do not know that man” — that helpless man. And he looks at his beloved master, who he believes is the Christ, the Messiah, the foretold ruler of all, and he looks at Him losing, refusing to fight, refusing to rule, or even to claim His kingdom, and he says a third time, completely truthfully, “I do not know that man!” — that loser! And then the cock crows, and the prophesy is fulfilled and Peter despairs, his hope dies, because his hope is based in his knowledge, and everything that he thinks he has known has fallen at his feet.

And in the days that follow, death is followed by silence, and then silence by rumor and confusion, talk of resurrection—but resurrection to what? Jesus is seen, but then he disappears. He is the same, but somehow very, very different. Peter is excited, but sits with the echoes of his anger and betrayal, which Christ seems not to address. And so one morning, Peter goes back to the only thing he has ever really known, fishing. And just

Today we have listened to the reading of epistles from all over this Earth. In listening to these Friends’ voices I have been struck by this: If ever there was a time to seek hope,—now is the time. If ever there was a time to renew the hope that is within us,—now is the time. If ever there was a time to celebrate that hope which is within us,—now is the time.

The Apostle Peter speaks to us from almost two millennia past and gives us this advice: “Be prepared at all times to give a good explanation of the hope that is inside you.” (1 Peter 3:15) His words could also be translated “Be prepared in all times.” Now seems like as good a time as any.

It seems remarkable to me that of all the Apostles, it is Simon Peter giving this advice to us. I want to recall with you Peter, and his hope, because his hope is so close to my own hope.

This advice comes from Simon the son of Jonah, a fisherman of Galilee. How would you like to be in the fish business with the family name of Jonah? But ironically the name fits, because like Jonah of old, Simon was an impulsive guy. His attachment to Christ starts with an impulse; he and his fellows are fishing all night, catching nothing, when this carpenter-turned-rabbi tells them to throw their nets to the other side, and when they do, the catch is so large that it almost swamps them. And Simon, leaving the catch of a lifetime, drops his nets and follows this man.

This is the same Simon whom the master re-names Peter, which means Rock. And the word means a big stable rock like Gibraltar, not a skipping stone. I think this has to be a

joke, a tease, part of the play with words that was a mainstay entertainment of the day. Jesus said, "I call you stability - and on this steadiness I will build my church," and all must have laughed at the joke.

This is the same Peter who walked on water. Jesus sent the disciples on ahead of him across the lake one day so that he could get a little peace and quiet. But while they were out far from shore they were caught in a storm and in mortal peril. The scripture says that their master walked out to them upon the water. And seeing Him they all screamed in fright at what they assumed was a ghost, all except for Peter who saw his master in the middle of the impossible and said, "If you command me to come I will walk out to join you." The answer was "Come!" and out of the boat he leapt, and walked, until he took his eyes off the Source of his strength and noticed the fury of the wind and he sank... like a rock. Jesus comments on his "little faith," and we often take this as a scold, but I always want to jump and defend Peter; after all, he had a lot more faith than all those guys screaming in the boat! Maybe it was more of a compassionate observation: Look at the little faith you have and how far it got you; imagine what a full faith could do!

This is Peter, one of the favored three who went almost everywhere with Jesus. When Jesus has a divine appointment on the top of a mountain, and the heavens open and he converses with Elijah and Moses, Peter is there. Being himself. At first sleeping through the important parts of this mystical opening. And then upon awakening, he is so excited by the moment that he cannot bear to let it pass, and suggests that they try to build

houses for the heavenly prophets so that they can stay awhile. It comes across as so ludicrous that even the Gospel writer apologizes: "Peter did not know what he was saying." But that is Peter, sleeping through glory one minute and trying to capture it the next.

Peter, the speaker of nonsense, who can, in another breath, be a prophet of truth and clarity. "Who do they say I am?" asks Jesus, and they speak to him of the many conflicting and confusing ways he was seen. "Who do you say I am?" He asks again, and it is Peter who says, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God!" Peter, who is certain of his knowledge.

This is the same Peter the zealot, who, in the garden of Gethsemane, draws his sword to defend the one who he believes is the Christ, the son of the living God. The one who, when his master predicts fickleness on his part, declares that he will die first. All fire and certainty this one, except when he is plagued by fear and foolishness.

And this is the same Peter who only hours later, not only does not fight for his master, but denies any knowledge of him at all. Perhaps such a turn should not surprise us, coming from this man, but it does; his words ring out painfully from the text, "I do not know that man!" and we cringe. This is often interpreted as cowardice and fear for his life. But I think something else is going on, because for all his fickleness, Peter had not shown signs of being a coward. No, I think something else entirely is going on here. I think what we are seeing is anger. When Jesus tells Peter to put away his sword and he meekly offers himself up to his accusers, I think Peter's core of knowledge is shaken to its