

How do you respond when a storm is coming?

It feels like a timely question. After all, September IS the peak of storm season in Florida. Are there any emotions attached to the word, “hurricane” for you? God has wired each of us a little differently. Maybe you’re one of those hardened Floridians who doesn’t even wince at the thought of a category 3 or smaller. It’s a few palm fronds in the yard. People need to calm down. Or maybe you’re opposite. You’re already annoyed that I even said the word. You’re thinking....Quietest season on record and you probably just ruined it trying to be cute with the sermon opening.

My family and I moved to Florida from Pennsylvania in 2009, and we came knowing that big storms were part of the price of admission to paradise. The first 8 years we lived here were pretty quiet and uneventful. But, I’ll never forget a very specific feeling in the pit of my stomach, It was Labor Day weekend 2017. There was just starting to be some news about a large storm developing in the Atlantic called Irma. It was a week or more away from endangering the US, but I decided I should probably grab a couple cases of water and one or two things for my hurricane supplies. I think of myself on the cautious side, being a little ahead of the game and overly prepared. But, you can imagine my surprise to discover that earlier that weekend, stores had already sold out of bottled water. Even overpriced convenient stores had bare shelves out front. But, I wasn’t alarmed, just surprised. But, I’ll never forget stopping by Home Depot on my last errand stop. As I walked to the back of the store, on those large 30 foot high platforms and racks for lumber, are three young adult men, who have climbed to the upper section of the platform and are hurriedly lower sheets of plywood from the upper level down to their friends on the lower one. I had never seen anything like that before. And I **remember feeling a little hit of fear and adrenaline in that moment. I thought, “maybe this is gonna be a big deal. I need to get ready”**

Our scripture passage this morning feels a lot like “storm instructions.” Words that are meant to help believers be ready for and respond to what’s ahead. The passage is found in 1 Peter 4, verses 7-11.

The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. <sup>8</sup> Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup> Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. <sup>10</sup> Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. <sup>11</sup> If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Many of you are well-familiar with these verses, but I think the audience and context are especially important to unpack this morning. The letter of 1 Peter is written to outsiders in a couple of ways.

First, his audience is exiled and scattered church. Verse 1 is addressed to “God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” His readers were on the outer reaches of the known world, and they were in cities and regions that were not their own.

They were likely Gentiles, meaning not from inside the Jewish faith. In chapter 2, verse 10, he writes, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” And in chapter 4, verse 3, he says they “spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do” So, additionally, these are spiritual outsiders, who have now been brought in to a different way of life and spiritual family.

in Chapter 2 verse 11, Peter addresses them as “aliens and strangers in the world,” which is likely BOTH a reality of their geographical exile, but also a spiritual metaphor. Because of their faith in Jesus, these outsiders are also living on an earth that is no longer their ultimate home. They’ve been made for another world, and Peter is teaching them to not belong to this one, to not fall in love with this life and its passions.

*Why is this important?* Because in many ways, we can relate. We too are aliens and strangers in this world. Because of our heavenly home, we’re really meant to just be passing through. But, we’re also increasingly becoming outsiders in our own culture and country. For most of your lives, Christian faith has been considered mainstream and respected. But, we’re entering a time when its regarded with skepticism and even hostility.

**“The end of all things is near”**

*Now, before we can get to his instructions, we have to deal with the premise. Is the end of all things near?*

After all, Peter wrote this 2,000 years ago. How near could it have been?

The Alliance uses the word “imminent” when it describes the return of Christ. They believe everything that the Scriptures have said must be accomplished HAS BEEN accomplished. There’s nothing left to inhibit Christ’s return.

But, we’ve also not been given a time or date on which to expect him. When Jesus taught about his return, He even says, “I don’t know when I’m coming back.” Therefore, live as if I could always come back.

Tim Keller explains “imminence” with a funny story....it’s about his family running a little late for church. He and one of his sons are ready and waiting in the car for the rest of his family to come down and climb in. It’s a beautiful fall day and his son says, “Dad, it’s so nice out, why don’t you take a quick spin around the park here, we can look at the leaves and the trees.” Keller replies, “Yeah, but mommy is coming down any minute. ANY minute.” After 10 minutes had passed, his son points out that they could have easily been around the park three times by now. In other words, Dad was wrong 10 minutes ago when he said mommy could be here any minute.” And the answer is, no he wasn’t. (some of you wise husbands & fathers understand) In hindsight, mommy didn’t come in the first minute, second minute, third minute...but because mommy could always show, at ANY time, and to know that if he’s on his way around the park when she does show, he’s in tremendous trouble...means that at every minute, it was true. That the end was near. for the waiting.

*When Peter said the end was near, he was right. And when we say now (2,000 years later) that the end is near, we are right. Because Jesus says we must live as if He could come back at any time.*

The reason a lot of Alliance folks get so passionate about the “imminent return” is that... it gives a lot of fuel and motivation to live Godly lives AND to share the good news throughout the world.

But, as we approach this specific passage, there’s also some good reason to believe that Peter was not just referring to the return of Christ, but something else...

Here’s how the case goes:

Peter knew better than to think he knew when Christ would return specifically. He was with Jesus in the account of Acts, when the apostles asked Him “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” And Jesus replies, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set”

Jesus said in Matthew and Mark’s Gospel that even the Son of God doesn’t know the day or the hour of His return, only the Father.

Secondly, Jesus had told Peter that he’d live to see his older years in **John 21:18**, Here’s what He says: “But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” (Can I just say...probably not the future word Peter was hoping for. Not something you write in someone’s retirement card.)

But, the point is: Peter knows he’s going to get old...he knows there are things that still need to take place before Jesus’ return.

So, instead you could make a case that Peter is pointing to Jesus' warning about the "end of the age" that Jesus talked about in Luke 21. In this chapter, Jesus describes the future demolition of the temple saying: "Not one stone will be left upon another." Jesus warns of "Jerusalem being surrounded by armies and being trampled under foot by the Gentiles." These sound like the events to come in AD 70. But, there's also a cue or a sign that must come before. In verse 12, Jesus says, "but before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you"

I think that persecution was the sign that Peter was beginning to witness in front of him. But, it was just the first part of a much larger storm. The writing of 1 Peter is usually dated anywhere between 60 and 64 AD, putting it very close to the burning of Rome, which will destroy much of the city and which Emperor Nero will blame on Christians, beginning a severe persecution. In just the next few years will come the arrest and execution of Peter himself, and his followers would see the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple as Jesus predicted. Many more believers would be scattered over the known world and I think Peter is writing these words to the believers to PREPARE them for the coming storm.

This morning, I want to unpack Peter's instructions one by one. Although he had a specific audience, we too feel the tension of being in the world and yet not of it. We too are entering a time of increasing hostility and resistance to the faith. I'm certain you look with concern at the world your grandchildren are inheriting, so vastly different than the one you grew up in. Honestly I have the same concerns for my own two school age children. ...so how do we live in light of the clouds that have gathered?? I think you'll be encouraged by Peter's words...let's dive in...

Peter writes, "*The end of all things is near*"

- 1) "Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray."

It'd be impossible for Peter to write these words and not be taken back to his memories of that last night with Jesus. Being invited to follow Jesus and pray in the garden, yet being unable to stay awake, and Jesus rousing him, seeing his Master troubled and sweating, hearing him say plead, "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" and saying specifically to Peter..."Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Matthew 26:41

In the garden, the end was near for Jesus' earthly life and He was likely already experiencing the agony of his separation from God the Father. But, in that moment of unimaginable trouble, Jesus demonstrates prayer as the response. Peter knew all too well his propensity toward "fight or flight." But, Jesus shows him something very different. Jesus looked sober-mindedly at the trouble, and prayed that God might help him stand the test. And older and wiser Peter invites believers to do the same in their present troubles.

And just a side note: Isn't it remarkable that Jesus doesn't want to be alone in the garden. If Jesus needed loved ones to be close in a crisis, why do we who are spiritual EVER think we don't need others or should carry it alone?

I'm reminded on this day particularly of the trauma and the fear on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Collectively, our nation saw an evil and a horror unlike any we'd seen before. Fear and uncertainty were appropriate emotions. But, how did people respond? Well, we certainly saw heroes. And do you remember how many instinctively gathered together in churches to pray, and to not be alone?

2) *Peter continues...* "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

It's believed that Peter is referencing **Proverbs 10:12**, which says, "*Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.*"

What a remarkable teaching. Another version translates it, "*Stay fervent in love for one another.*" The word deeply or fervently here in Greek literally means, "Strained." It's used of athletes straining to reach the tape or clear the bar. If there's ever a time to stretch our love for one another to the limit, it's the end times. Peter's words put the focus on the effect of our love ...that it would enable fellowship and unity IN SPITE of sins! A glue that holds strong when there are inevitable cracks.

Here at the Village Church, the staff uses a strengths and personality test, called SDI to improve their work as a team. When I first came to Shell Point, they graciously invited me to participate. **(SHOW GRAPHIC)** The inventory puts a dot where each person's natural motive comes from when things are good...when they're in their "happy" place...and then with the arrow, it shows how we respond under stress. The church staff uses this tool to better understand what's going on inside each team member, what they need, both in the everyday, but ESPECIALLY when we're in crisis.

This passage in 1 Peter is saying a very similar thing. That the love we have for each other needs to reach beyond the divides of sin and self, particularly in a storm. Love forgives. It keeps no record of wrongs. It always trusts, hopes and perseveres. And remember: Love doesn't ignore or diminish sin. This isn't sweeping things under the rug. I can't truly love a brother or sister, and not have hard conversations. Sometimes we need to hold up a mirror. Love doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

I don't want to overstate this, but in the decades when Christians have been the cultural majority, when the church has been considered a societal good, and we as believers are largely respected for those beliefs ... the body of Christ can feel like a nicety. We can take unity for granted. But, when we're opposed, facing regular resistance, labeled as a hate group and despised for our influence....the body of Christ is a necessity. We just won't stand without it.

Arguing amongst ourselves, taking sides over the political issues, much less arguing and being divided over finer points of theology...it's a luxury we can no longer afford.

*Peter builds on his teaching of love by saying, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling."*

This is a practical application and extension of "love each other deeply." The Greek word for hospitality literally means "love of strangers." This is the type of love that widens the circle. We all have the people that we know, that we love, the ones we get along with and check in on...and Peter says love your circle deeply. But, his second instruction is: widen the circle. These were already people who were considered outsiders, but human nature is to love those we love and that love us. Peter says keep reaching out. There's always more room in our circle.

And as a parent of two children, I love the addition of "without grumbling". Isn't that just the kicker? I bet you've received or at least seen a reluctant forced apology, right? Our kids are 12 & 9, and they're awesome. We love them to bits, but when we as parents, make the mistake of ordering them to apologize, before they've had time to cool off or think about what they've done....when in their heart, they're still angry and really don't want to....oh, the results are cringeworthy. You might get the word, "Sorry", but it's dripping with insincerity or disdain, or maybe an eye roll.

God is far more concerned about our hearts than our external motions or actions. This is a call to GENUINE hospitality, where we truly want the best for a person. It's the kind that is often on display in our community here at Shell Point.

But, how can we practice that kind of circle widening love? When caring for our familiar favorites feels so much more natural?

We can do it as Christ's own deep love is allowed to penetrate into our hearts and lives. You've heard the phrase "Hurt people hurt people" But, the inverse is so true..."Loved people love people."

Paul said Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. The love that we've received, displayed by Christ on the cross, totally undeserved, covering every one of our innumerable sins, it is the bond greater than ALL that would divide us.

Finally, Peter gives us this beautiful outworking and ministry application....

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides"

These are two beautiful examples that Peter gives of a larger catalog of spiritual gifts explained in Romans 12, in 1 Cor 12, and Ephesians 4.

When I was a youth pastor, I loved teaching about the spiritual gifts because it was an excuse to bring out my collection of Mr. Potatohead toys. Mr Potatohead needs all his parts, and likewise the body of Christ needs all it's members (YOU!) to be complete. None receiving special honor over the other. But, I don't need to belabor the point of spiritual gifts. You know that well.

But, what's easy to overlook, particularly when we're tired, or discouraged...is our importance to the Body. We can't outsource our role to other, seemingly gifted members. It's an "All hands on deck" kind of body. None of us know exactly how long we have on this side of eternity, but while you and I draw breath, God has a purpose and a calling on us. The people that God has put in our path and in our relational world...our family, our friends and neighbors, those who care for or serve us...these are the ones He'd have us encourage and point to Jesus.

But, Peter reminds us that those gifts can't be used just in our own strength and wisdom.

Quite frankly, there are conversations that you and I need to have with a culture that is increasingly skeptical of religious faith, especially Christianity. I'm also pretty sure I don't have the right words for them. We don't always have the formula for breaking through to our loved ones and friends who are thus far untouched by the good news. I don't have the sharp apologetical comebacks or intellect to stand toe to toe with our greatest critics. So, I need the very words of God. I need Him living through me.

Alliance founder, A.B. Simpson, describes it this way: "He [Christ] actually comes into our being and becomes the source and strength of our very life, reliving His own life in us."

This takes the burden for our health or lack thereof, for our energy level or lack thereof, and it puts it on God, the healer and sustainer. This is exactly what Simpson did when he was dealing with a debilitating health condition. He prayed that God would live His life and His resurrection power through his body, and he experienced a divine healing and sustaining until the end of his days. Christ as Healer became a central tenet of Alliance theology, because we believe Christ wants to live through us.

When each of us commit to that personally, the body becomes stronger, able to stand in spite of the storm.

And the end result of Jesus living through us?? Peter writes, "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."

Because of Jesus, we don't have to be afraid of the storm. Because of grace, we welcome the return of Christ. But, let's be sober-minded and alert as we wait. My kids and your kids, they need parents and grandparents and great-grandparents who are helping us all be prepared for the days and years ahead.



I want God's Word to speak for itself and be careful to not try to jam it carelessly into our specific context. But, I also want to just share my heart for a moment. I've been blessed with an incredible opportunity to minister to the men and women that work at Shell Point. But, I also feel an increasing burden and responsibility to help steward and safeguard the mission and spiritual values of this really special community. I try to look at Shell Point not ONLY in terms of this week or this year, but 10 years from now, 30 years from now. What do we need to be doing right now to ensure that our staff and leadership are living out and passing on our mission and values to the future leaders to come? How do we make sure that we're caring for our current and future employees with a love that covers over the many things that would divide us?

I love the carillon that plays from the church over Shell Point. But, I worry that there could become a day when it's just an empty throwback to when we USED to be a Christian community.

The beauty of this passage is there's a place to go with those worries. I can take that to God in prayer, and in the place of anxiety, He gives me rocket fuel to come to work EACH DAY and LOVE deeply. To offer hospitality to the people God puts in my path. To ask Him to speak His words through me. To ask Him to lend me His strength. And I don't want to do it alone.

Some of you wake up with a very similar passion. We're on the same team. You're LOVING your circle, you're reaching out to your neighbors and the employees that serve you. You're committed to prayer, and you're lifting up your family, and your spiritual family all around the world.

But, this takes all of us. Shell Point needs the Village Church to be a white-hot vibrant spiritual community that loves deeply. It needs a church that is passionate about widening the circle. A place that not only looks to our own interests and preferences, but also the interests of those not here yet? Can we be the kind of church that will attract and grow the residents that are just joining our community or aren't here yet? Will it be their church too?

Our instructions are clear. For our families, for our friends, for our community, for the Body of Christ. Lean in. Be Clear minded and in prayer. Love deeply, reach out. As long as you draw breath, use your gifts for the glory of God. And let's do it with His words, power and strength inside of us. The end is near. Let's roll.

*Heavenly Father,*