

Hope

The delay of Jesus' return. Religion under attack from the surrounding culture. Ethnic division in the church. A raging pandemic. Sound familiar? It should. These words tell the story of God's people—close to 2,000 years ago.

The early church believed that Christ was coming soon (Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20), even though they did not know when (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32; Luke 21:34-36). While they waited, the Roman Empire destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Zealots and pagans persecuted Christ's followers. Jewish and Gentile believers turned on each other with bitter disputes about religious rituals and laws. Plagues afflicted the empire, triggering widespread panic—but not among the early Church.

Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that hope animated the early church under pressure. The early church placed their hope in God's promised future, not the strength of the empire around them. Bolstered by hope, the early church stuck with their sick neighbors in the midst of pandemic fear, most notably as the families of their neighbors abandoned them while fleeing for safety. Hope mobilized the early church for grassroots mission, building faith-infused social networks for the common good—Christian or not. Stark writes, "Christian values of love and charity had, from the beginning, been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity."* Ultimately, Stark argues, the living hope of the early church fed wave upon wave of faith conversion and numerical growth.

Inspired by hope, the early church understood themselves as a lifeboat on a search-and-rescue mission. In fact, an early symbol of the church was a ship. We can see from Scripture where the early church connects to this symbolism. In Matthew 4:18-22, Jesus first meets Peter on his fishing boat, saying "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." Later in that same gospel, the disciples endure a torrential midnight storm on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus walks to them on the water, speaking these words of hope: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (14:24). Peter jumps out of the boat and promptly starts to sink, but Jesus lifts him up. Mark 4:35-41 tells the story of Jesus rebuking the wind and waves, even as Peter and the other disciples fret for their lives. In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples to "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch" (5:5). When the disciples obey, they catch so many fish that their nets begin to break, and their boats begin to sink (5:6-7). Basically, whenever Jesus and Peter get together on a boat, God fills Peter's heart with promise and hope.

Tertullian, the early Church father, ascribes great importance to Peter's encounters with Christ at sea. Tertullian sees those encounters as an emblem of faith. In *On Baptism* (chapter 12), Tertullian writes:

But that little ship (the ship that Peter was in) did present a figure of the Church, in that she is disquieted "in the sea," that is, in the world, "by the waves", that is, by persecutions and temptations; the Lord, through patience, sleeping as it were, until, roused in their last extremities by the prayers of the saints, He checks the world, and restores tranquility to His own.

To the culture which surrounded the early church, the sea seemed wild and untamed, symbolizing all that is chaotic in life. In response, the early church placed their hope in a faith confession that God brings order to chaos, provides a vessel for protection, and sends them on a missionary journey with Jesus leading the way. The ship still stands as a worthy emblem of the church, symbolizing trust, confidence, and hope in Christ even as storms rage around it.

In times of crisis, however, the church confronts the temptation to place its trust, confidence, and hope in something other than Christ. Unchecked fear and misplaced trust can drown hope. The seeds of this problem predate Christ, threaded through the history of ancient Israel. It was misplaced trust that led astray Adam and Eve. God said to His children, "Trust me." His children said, "We'll trust the serpent instead. He promised us knowledge." It was fear that led astray the Hebrews in the Wilderness. God said to them, "Trust me." The Hebrews said, "We wish we had trusted the Pharaoh of Egypt instead. He fed us when we were hungry." It was fear and misplaced trust led astray the nation of Israel. God said to Israel, "Trust me." Israel responded, "We will trust our alliance with Assyria instead. Or our alliance with Babylon. Or our alliance with Persia. That will keep us safe." Those stories of false hope ended badly: cast out of the Garden; wandering for 40 years; betrayal, captivity, and enslavement.

Jesus Christ is the only one who can bring hope. The worthiness of Christ is reflected in His dual character as Lion and Lamb. Christ is called the Lion of Judah because He is the Supreme King over all creation. At the same time, Christ is called the Lamb of God because His Kingship is marked by self-giving, sacrificial love. No other person or program is worthy to do so. No other platform or political party can guarantee God's future for creation.

In Revelation 5:2, a mighty angel proclaims, "Who is worthy to

break the seals and open the scroll?" Put another way, this mighty angel asks a rhetorical question: "Who knows God's future for all creation? Who holds that future in his hands?" In response, an elder says, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:5). Immediately following, the Lion of Judah becomes the Lamb which was slain (5:6). In response, the four living creatures, the 24 elders, and thousands upon thousands upon thousands of angels sing a "new song" (Revelation 5:9a), saying:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and
nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our
God,
and they will reign on the earth" (5:9b-10).

And:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise (5:12b).

This is what a worthy king looks like. Not a dealmaker who over-promises and underdelivers. Not a bully who intimidates, a braggart who puffs up, or a fearmonger who scares people into compliance. Jesus is the worthy King who quietly, humbly, gives up His very life in order to secure the future for those whom He leads—not done begrudgingly, but gladly, for the sake of love.

To the first century church, or ship if you will, the book of Revelation served as a sea chart of hope in Christ. It outlined a constellation beyond the storm, pointing the way forward. Surrounded by chaos and tribulation, the early church needed to fix their eyes on that constellation. They needed to remember that resurrection—not doom—was ahead of them. When I was a child, the book of Revelation sounded like a message of fear to me, not a message of hope. My eyes focused upon God's judgement, not God's deliverance. Bad news, not good news. Now, as an adult, different elements in Revelation catch my eye and capture my heart. Words like these:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea (21:1).

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more

death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (21:4).

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new! Then he said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true" (21:5b).

Facing choppy waters, the first century church needed a hope that was grounded in the trustworthy and true. That holds true today for the 21st century church.

The church is a lifeboat on a search-and-rescue mission. It is hope in Christ which makes possible the mission. When hopelessness starts to pull the church toward a whirlpool of fearful self-preservation, hope enables boldness for the sake of others. Christ tells us that "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16: 25). Christ also says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). That's hope!

The church is a lifeboat, and each one of us is a crew member. We can flourish under pressure when we raise our sails to catch the wind of God's Spirit instead of pushing or rowing against it. The church must maintain a course of self-giving and sacrificial love for God and neighbor. It is not our mission to drop anchor in the lagoon, rocked gently back and forth by a gentle breeze. The church is at its best when in motion. A stationary or stagnant life will just cover us with crusty barnacles that slow us down, waste our energy, and rot us out. Instead, it is our mission to scan the horizon for the floundering and drowning, throwing them a lifeline and pulling them to safety. It is also our mission to work together, hanging onto each other when stormy seas threaten to toss some of us overboard.

The church of the 21st century is not a fortress from the world—it is built to sail through choppy waters without capsizing as its sailors sing their only song of hope: Jesus Christ is Lord.

*Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 74.

MARK HAYSE is professor of Christian Education, Director of the Mabee Library, and Director of the undergraduate Honors Program at MidAmerica Nazarene University in Olathe, KS. He is also an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene, having spent over a decade in the pastoral office.