

The author of First Peter obviously doesn't realize that his words will be read by Lutherans.

Or maybe he does.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in you, he counsels, and the thought of it puts most of us on the defensive immediately.

There are reasons the average Lutheran only invites a new person to church once every twenty-three years, although that stat is dated; perhaps it doesn't happen so often anymore.

Here at Resurrection, we have famously said that this church is not too Jesus-y, then proceeded to debate whether that is a good thing or not.

Our own accountings for the hope that is in us are written reflections by email which seem to be addressed mostly to other church members, not to the world at large--they seem to assume a friendly, supportive readership of like-minded, not too Jesus-y Christians.

We look at those who write these wonderful offerings with admiration and respect, and rightly so, knowing full well that they are difficult and personal, a task fraught with risk, like praying out loud in a room with other people in it.

I would say that is also something all of us should *always be ready* to do, but that's probably a pastor's pipe dream, as we are far too caught up in ourselves and our various degrees of vanity and insecurity let our unscripted speech to God leak outside of our own heads.

And there are reasons for our reticence, valid ones along with the vain ones.

We have seen too often the way pious prayer and personal testimony spoils quickly into displays that chase people away from Christ and make any God who would listen to *that* seem like a cosmic buffoon...tirades of judgment, rambles of nonsense, pompous self-congratulation costumed as prayer, and worst of all, earnest windbags who take longer than the allotted thirty seconds!

We have seen the ways that religion in general and Christianity in particular on the loose in the hands of the masses, God's pearls in the muddy hooves of swine, get perverted into a weapon, not only underwriting violence and warfare and myopia but also wielding fear and judgment, subtle as well as overt, on those who differ and doubt.

Religion so often is used to beat down instead of lifting up, to divide rather than to unite, to exclude rather than to embrace, to condemn rather than to heal.

We at Resurrection are particularly sensitive to this nastiness as a community blessed with so many of God's gay and lesbian children, members as well as nervous neighbors long bludgeoned and bloodied by Jesus-y judgment and religious rejection.

We know the raw power of our religion, the capacity of Scripture to move our heavy stone hearts, the force of prayer and preaching, and we are uncomfortable handling it, like a conscientious, careful sixth grader handed a pistol or the keys to a car.

Talking about God is more than we feel ready for.

The potential peril to God's reputation, and to ours, is too daunting.

The danger works both ways, of course.

Not only does religion wreak wicked havoc on the world, but the world isn't always so kind to the religious, either.

The author of First Peter admits as much with his vocabulary: *defense to anyone who demands*.

The world is ill-prepared for the heart of our hope, which we name grace, a Mystery beyond our comprehension and control which forgives, loves, restores, and gives away continuously and generously rather than hoarding, guarding, competing, controlling, criticizing, dividing, and conquering, as we in the world are taught to do.

The world's *modus operandi* leads into a vortex of hopelessness, so when it sees hope in us, it attacks, not only because hope is a threat, but also because hope is its deepest longing and desire, what it most desperately wants and needs.

The world starves for the grace we know, for real hope, a reason to go on, a compass in the storm and compassion during the frightful passage.

If there is hope in us, the world that wants it and needs it will demand it from us, because demand is the language it speaks.

So be ready.

*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in you; **yet do it with gentleness and reverence.***

What the world needs even more than the message of hope is the medium.

This poor, beat-up world aches and longs for gentleness and reverence.

We need to be ready to make our defense without defensiveness, but with such deep and daring confidence in God that we need not prove anything, ourselves or our beliefs...we don't need to be right or respected, because we are God's beloved children, and that is enough.

Our defense of our hope doesn't have to win over the jury; it simply needs to be a gift, a genuine offering of gentleness and reverence, the honest and tender witness of someone who has been overwhelmed by the goodness of God, a goodness so deep and strong and kind that it leaves us humble and grateful, gentle and reverent.

Somewhere, somehow, God has been good to you.

Jesus left the disciples and sent the Advocate, the Holy Spirit cast in the role of defense attorney, the one who speaks on our behalf, who makes the defense for us, so that even this daunting expectation from First Peter is really another gift that God provides for us.

The great thing about this Advocate is that the Spirit is not confined to one body, like Jesus, but is breath, wind, fire, a presence invisible and unstoppable that spreads to many places at once, reaching everyone, reaching even you.

Somewhere, somehow, the Advocate has touched and blessed you.

Somewhere, somehow, God has been good to you.

Otherwise, why would you waste your Sunday morning coming here?

You must have some reason to be humble and grateful enough to worship, some hope within you that is deep enough to be shared, not self-righteously and obnoxiously, but with gentleness and reverence.

What is it?

What is the hope that is in you?

Turn to a neighbor, and tell them the hope that is in you, and listen to the hope that is in them.

No really, we're not going to continue until you find a neighbor or two and, in the safety of this sacred space, gently, reverently give and receive the gift of *an accounting of the hope that is in you.*

PAUSE for CONVERSATION

God so loves the world that God not only sent the only begotten Son, but now also sends the Advocate to strengthen and to send you.