

## Sermon: The Hope That Is In You

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 10, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I recalled being dropped off the tour bus on a dusty trail, beside the river Jordan, one sunny afternoon, when Daisy and I had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land, of Israel and Palestine, a number of years ago.

The tour guide explained what we were about to see up ahead, the possible site where Jesus was baptized by John, some two thousand years ago. Almost apologetically, our guide forewarned us not to be disappointed, as the water level back then would've most certainly be much higher than it is now. Something about the Israeli government siphoning off precious water upstream for agriculture purposes, leaving those downstream in the region of Jericho and the Kingdom of Jordan high and dry.

True to his words, as we turned the corner, we came upon a dried up, cracked open riverbed, with barely a trickle of muddy water flowing down the middle, as a reminder of what was once a mighty river, and could somehow still be, someday. To be honest, it was a sorry sight to behold.

Yet as our group stared across the river, on the other side of the riverbank, we saw a sight that perhaps only faithful Christians could truly comprehend—a group of people in white robes, waiting in line to be dipped into a shallow pool of muddy water—of what could only be a service of baptism. The removal of dirt from the body was not their intended purpose; but the union and the communion with the Lord Jesus Christ was.

I suspect most of those lining up to be dunked into that muddy pool of Jordan were already Christians, already baptized elsewhere, previously, perhaps even years ago. But to be in the same body of water as that Jesus Christ, to be baptized in the same locale, no matter how shabby its current state, no matter how muddy the actual water, the experience in itself is priceless, could hardly be explained in words, certainly not to those outside of the faith, for most would not understand.

I was tempted to join the line, to inquire if it was permitted, perhaps I could also be re-baptized, but our group was on a tight schedule, so all I could settle for was a small vial of bottled water, conveniently labeled 'Water of Jordan', bought from a nearby souvenir store. As the Apostle Peter says, "*Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.*" (1 Peter 3:15)

The hope that is in you. Of course Peter wasn't talking about bottled water from the river Jordan, or why anyone would lined up to be dunked into muddy, dirty pool of water. Peter was counselling the early believers to be ready, at any time, to give a public and passionate testimonial of their faith in Christ. Why do they follow Jesus? How have they come to faith? And after all these, why do they still believe?

Writing to a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians in communities scattered across the provinces of Asia Minor (or modern-day Turkey), Peter understood the harassment, the social ostracism, and the eventual persecution they were to face. Often chastised as strangers and aliens by their neighbours, due to their newfound faith, some even went as far as mis-characterizing those followers of Jesus, as an incestuous, cannibalistic, blood drinking cult, on the account of eating the body of Christ, drinking the blood of Christ, and marry one's sister or brother in Christ.

Yet Peter described these early Christians as "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation*" (1 Peter 2:9), using language previously reserved for Israel, to characterize their newfound identity in Christ. More than a mere recognition of this new identity, more than a straight forward proclamation of "*the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*", followers of Jesus must be ready, at all time, to testify in defence of the faith.

Christian apologetics, derived from the Greek word *apologia*, that is the intellectual defence and rational justification of the Christ faith, has its basis in this urging from Peter: always be ready to make your defence...of the hope that is in you.

The brave action of the Apostle Paul in front of the Areopagus, would certainly be a prime example. Speaking to an esteem crowd, at the centre of Athen's intellectual and philosophical elites, Paul pulled no punches, "*Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*" (Acts 17:22-23)

He then went on to proclaim the "unknown God" as the one creator of the universe who does not live in temples made by human hands. He argued that God is not far from anyone, urging the the Athenians to stop worshipping idols and repent, as a day of judgement has been appointed through Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

It's amazing that Paul had the nerve to stand up there and say anything at all, gentle, polite, or otherwise. The author of the Acts of the Apostles writes that when Paul had finished speaking at the Areopagus, some scoffed. I can't begin to imagine how might that have felt.

Though I have been proclaiming the gospel for years, it has been done mostly in the safe confine of a sanctuary. I can't imagine going to the city hall, getting permission from Mayor Mark Sutcliffe, and addressing the city council with an authentic Easter message. I can't do it, gently, politely or otherwise.

Why was Paul then compelled to look silly and risk ridicule? Why did he go on to synagogues and marketplaces, risked being vulnerable to derision, scorn and worse? Peter seems to know why: *"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."* (v.18) The redemptive suffering of Jesus has opened the door to our salvation and liberation. Intuitively, Paul understood the suffering he endures in scorn and ridicule pale in comparison to the joy he experiences when some are brought to God, to be reconciled. That is what he was invited to partake in, to share in Christ's sufferings and the inevitable glory.

Always be ready to make your defence of the hope that is in you. Hope is a bit of an elusive thing. Philosophers distinguish between two kinds of hope: the intentional (that is hoping for a certain outcome) and the dispositional (that is a hopeful outlook).

The intentional hope for us Christians, at least those who still gather in Christian worship, would intuitively understand, that is hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Dispositional hope, on the other hand, is like habits of the heart. It may be inborn in some lucky individuals, but it is also a trait that can be nurtured and trained.

Here I find the spiritual practice of the daily examen quite helpful. Originally developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Daily Examen is a 10-15 minute technique of prayerful reflection, usually at the end of a day before one retires to bed. It's a five-step process of presence, gratitude, review, repentance and resolution.

**Presence** is becoming aware of God's presence, asking for light to see the day as God does. **Gratitude** is to give thanks to God, not in the general sense, but for specific gifts or encounters. Then one **reviews** the events of the day, paying particular attention to emotions and reactions. **Repentance** involves asking for forgiveness for shortcomings during the day. And finally one **resolve** to look ahead toward tomorrow with hope, while asking God for grace.

That's it, five simple steps of presence, gratitude, review, repentance and resolution. Five simple steps of building a hopeful disposition with the intention of inviting God to be present in your lives. Why don't you give it a try, starting tonight.?

Another practice I have found to be equally useful, which I picked up in my seminary days, is to write down and be ready to present a three-minute testimonial, of why I still hope, and why I still believe.

Testimonial does not have to be a recounting of a life altering event, or miraculous encounter; testimonial is simply sharing of the little moments of grace that God has bestowed in your lives. I find it helpful to start with this phrase: I give thanks to God for...

Why don't I me put myself to the test: I give thanks to God for how you, the members and adherents of St. Giles, for how you have stepped up in serving this community of faith.

You may have read in the annual report of St. Giles that I've described the current challenge of this congregation as the passing of baton. Just like in a relay race when the runner ahead has to slow down, and the runner behind has to speed up, in order for the baton to be passed on successfully, so goes the congregational life, where those who have been so faithful in serving the congregation would pass on, by design or by necessity, the duty and the privilege to serve and care for this community of faith to the next generation.

I give thanks to God for how many of you have stepped up, at the session level, at various committees and groups. I see new people taking on new roles, learning the ropes from those who are eager to teach, to pass on the wisdom of their journey of faith.

Some of you might know that I take part in a mentoring group of fellow pastors. There is this one particular young pastor, who is having a real difficult time of finding anyone willing to serve, to step up in position of servant leadership. He recounted his failed efforts in approaching people, asking them if they are open to serve as deacon in the church. All have turned him down, despite the seemingly vibrant make-up of his congregation, with many young families and dual-income couples. It seems that busyness was the common reason, or excuse of not being able or willing to serve. I sympathize; and those in the mentoring group took turn offering their advice to this young pastor; hopefully it might help.

The more so that I give thanks to God for you, at St. Giles. We are not a large congregation, but we care for one another, and we care for this church, my family away from home. For that, I have hope, and this little bit of grace that God has blessed us with, is what keeps me going day after day.

So that's my story, my three-minutes testimonial. Now I pass the baton to you. What is your story, what is your hope? How would you tell it, and to whom?

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