

A Solid Anchor

Dear friends, don't be surprised about the fiery trials that have come among you to test you. These are not strange happenings. Instead, rejoice as you share Christ's suffering. You share his suffering now so that you may also have overwhelming joy when his glory is revealed. If you are mocked because of Christ's name, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory—indeed, the Spirit of God—rests on you.

Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. To him be power forever and always. Amen.

1 Pet. 4:12-14; 5:6-11 (C.E.B.)

Last November, Merhan Karimi Nasseri died. Does anyone remember his name? His story was the basis for the book, *Terminal Man* (Corgi Books, 2004). He was born in a region of Iran, that at the time, was under British jurisdiction. At the age of 18, he left Iran to study in Britain. When he returned to Iran, he was imprisoned as an enemy of the Shah and the authorities revoked his passport, replacing it with papers that allowed him to leave the country but never return.

Nasseri went to Brussels, where the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees granted his application for political asylum and gave him papers that allowed him to apply for residence in any European country. After buying an airline ticket from Paris to London, he boarded a train and headed to Paris.

- Unfortunately for him, the asylum papers were locked in a suitcase that was stolen at a train station before he got to the airport.
 - Fortunately, he was allowed to board the plane after showing a copy of the theft report to police.
- Unfortunately, British immigration officers were not as lenient and sent him back to De Gaulle airport.

France wouldn't let him in, however; and, without a passport or a country willing to accept him, France couldn't expel him either. He was stuck in the airport, hence the name "terminal man." It would be comical, if there had been a resolution; but he remained in the airport for 18 years.

Nasseri – who adopted the nickname Alfred – became a fixture in the circular confines of Terminal One, well-known to shopkeepers, flight attendants, police officers, and even some passengers.

"It's not a good solution to live a long time like this," he said. "Living without a bed and without a room, it's depressing. Sometimes, I'll go to the chapel on Sunday, but no one can give me inspiration."

After nearly two decades of living at the airport he was released from his limbo by an illness that sent him to a hospital. Unable to find work after recovering, he lived on the streets for several years. He eventually returned to the airport, the only place he ever felt at home. Last fall he died there from a heart attack.

Whenever I think of Alfred's plight, I begin to think about how many times in our lives we feel trapped. We can't get out of our circumstances. There seems to be no place to turn.

- Some of us are anxious about our children who seem to have no sense of direction in their lives.
- Some of us are anxious about our parents who have no resources to deal with their medical needs.
- Some of us are anxious about our jobs and whether or not we will be able to keep a roof over our heads.
- We know others who are stuck in dead-end jobs and dying marriages.

None of us are immune from difficulties in life. We each have our own burdens to bear. We all have our own worries and concerns.

As I've been saying since we began this series of sermons after Easter, Peter writes to an audience who knows what it means to struggle. We may not be experiencing persecution as his first readers did, nor are we stuck in an airport with no way to leave. But we all experience tough times in life. Some of us suffer from physical difficulties, including sickness and disease. Others suffer from emotional trauma and hardship. While some of us struggle from economic stress and strain.

In our text for today, Peter encourages us to cast our worries, our cares, our anxieties upon God (1 Pet. 5:7). But for many of us, that's easier to say than it is to do. We find it difficult to let go of our concerns. We have a hard time releasing our worries and anxieties.

We're very much like the child who reaches into a jar to grab a piece of candy. We close our fist around the candy and we can't get our hand out of the jar. We're stuck and we don't know what to do. We're afraid that if we let go, we won't get any candy. So we allow ourselves to get locked into a position with no possible way to escape. And we become a prisoner of our own anxieties.

We may not be trapped in an airport, but we are just as immobilized.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Peter reminds us that in times of difficulty, we can learn to stand firm in our faith (1 Pet. 5:9).

I don't know if I've told you about my oak tree before. I planted an acorn in the fall of 1991 and in the spring, it began to grow. It wasn't very big when we moved that summer, so I transplanted it into our new yard.

That's when the trouble began. It was a very small tree, and someone didn't see it when they were mowing. All I had left of my tree was a stub, not much bigger than a toothpick. I managed to protect it from the mower with a wire cage, only to have it cut down again by a weed eater. So, I put rocks around it and managed the weeds by hand.

Somehow, it managed to hang on, despite the difficulties thrown at it.



This is a picture of that tree a few years ago. It's been through difficult times, but after thirty plus years it continues to grow. Rather than shying away from growing out of fear of another mower blade, the tree developed a strong root system that gave it the strength to grow.

Here's another picture of it to help you see the scale.

When we find ourselves cut down by life's circumstances, by our own worries and anxieties, we too can learn to put down deep spiritual roots, to stand firm in our faith (1 Pet. 5:9). Even in difficult times, we can learn to trust in God's presence, God's strength, God's support. In fact, my oak tree suggests

we can have stronger roots if we persevere through difficulties.



During some windstorms a few years ago, I noticed two types of things being blown down. The first were telephone poles that had no root system, the others were trees with wide, but shallow roots.

I don't know if you've ever paid attention to power poles. Most of them are simple wood poles with a few feet sunk into the ground. Their only connection to the world is the power line that connects them to the next pole. The wind catches the lines connecting one pole to another and pulls a whole section down, one after another.

At the turn, however, there is always an anchor line tying the pole to the ground. I'm sure an engineer could explain it better, but the power lines pull on the poles. It apparently isn't significant if they pull in opposite directions. At a turn, the lines pull in two different directions, so the anchor line holds the pole in place.

In windstorms, it's the corner poles, the ones with solid anchors, that hold fast. It's the poles without anchors that fall. They aren't prepared for the forces of the wind that pull them in a direction other than along the power lines.

Without roots, power poles need anchors to survive.

As I said, the other things I saw blown down were trees with shallow root systems. There were lots of roots, but they were not very deep. When the ground was a little wet, it didn't take much to push the entire tree down, leaving the roots exposed like a large wall at the foot of the tree trunk.

There are lessons in the trees and power poles for our faith development. Some people think that the only necessary part of their faith is a vertical relationship with God. Just me and God. A personal piety that can happen in any location. A faith that is heavily based on direct communication with God.

Like the power poles, they stand alone against the storms of life. Without anchor lines to keep them in place, however, they cannot withstand life's troubles.

Then there are the people who focus all their spiritual energy in relationships and institutions like the church. Their spiritual roots are spread out horizontally, reaching out and allowing others to provide mutual support in life's journey.

Like trees with shallow roots, however, these people often feel God is too remote to depend upon; and they soon learn that the broad community network isn't enough to carry them through difficult times.

The lesson of the power poles and trees is that we need *both* to become strong in faith. We need to reach up to God *and* out to one another. We need to allow God to feed us through deep roots and to receive nutrients from others around us.

When we have roots, we have a solid anchor. And we learn that we are never alone. There is no circumstance in which we cannot be supported by God. Not an empty airport terminal; not our own self-inflicted prisons of worry.

When Pastor Brett Dewey was here, he used an anchor as his own personal symbol to represent his understanding of God's presence and calling in his life. When he left, ten years ago, in 2013, he gifted the church with an anchor.

This is a picture of it. Anchors apparently held an important place in his spirituality. In his first newsletter article, he said this about the anchor:¹

The anchor had already been used as a symbol of hope before Christians came onto the scene. The reason is easy to see. Imagine yourself on a boat out at sea. The seas are rough. The winds are howling. You don't want to crash on the rocky shore. You fear drifting out to sea. Your hope rests in the anchor. A powerful symbol for hope, indeed! But as Christians looked at that important nautical tool, they noticed the cross bar and immediately saw a symbol of Christ. True hope is found in Christ, they believed, and they saw this represented in the anchor cross. And that is why I've selected "The Anchor" to be the title of this column. When we see the anchor, let us gaze on Christ our one, true hope.



Like the trees and power poles he suggests we can stand firm in our faith because we have a solid anchor. Like my oak tree, he affirms that a good root system can serve as an anchor in the midst of troubles.

While walking through a forest one day, an old teacher pointed out four plants to a young student. The first was just beginning to peep above the ground, the second had rooted itself pretty well into the earth, and the third was a small shrub. The fourth was a full-sized tree.

The tutor said to his young companion: "Pull up the first." The boy easily pulled it up with his fingers. "Now pull up the second." The youth obeyed, but found the task took his whole hand, not just his fingers. "Now the third." The boy had to put forth all his strength and needed to use both arms to uproot it. "And now," said the master, "try your hand at the fourth."

Not surprisingly, when the boy grasped the trunk of the tree in his arms, he hardly shook its leaves.

"This, my son, is just what happens with our bad habits. When our habits are young, we can cast them out more readily with the help of God; but when they are old, it is hard to uproot them, even with much prayer."

I would add the simple observation that it's also true that good habits are formed by disciplines maintained over time. Our task is to prepare our root systems before we meet a crisis so God can meet our needs in the storms of life.

¹ Brett Dewey, May 2010.

As Peter reminds us in our text today, Christ will “restore, empower, strengthen, and establish” us (1 Pet. 5:11). God is ever present within our circumstances.

- Even in windstorms.
- Even in the airport.
- Even in times of upheaval in our lives.
- Even in times of persecution.

“Dear friends, don’t be surprised about the fiery trials that have come among you to test you,” Peter says (1 Pet. 4:12).

But be assured, we can stand firm in our faith, because we have a solid anchor.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

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