This week we wrap up our Advent and Christmas series “Hope.” But first, a word on what we’ll be starting next week as we begin the new year. For the month of January, we’ll be in a 4-week series we’re calling “Real,” and the main questions we’re asking are, why are there barriers between us, what holds us back from truly knowing each other and being known by each other, and what are we supposed to do about it? We’ll see what Scripture has to say, starting next week.

But as for this week, here on the other side of Christmas, we’ll look at just what we’re supposed to do with the hope that has been promised and revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the four weeks of Advent, we’ve looked at some of the dark chapters in Israel’s history, revealing a longing in the Old Testament, a longing that ultimately we find is fulfilled in Jesus, but not just longings: also letdowns, also failures. All the ways that Israel had fallen short, and even ways they feared they might fall short again, all that disappointment, found its resolution in Jesus, born in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago.

Then on Christmas Eve, thinking that with all this build up and hope in the Old Testament, what we should expect is some grand finale, some big reveal, but that’s not exactly what we get. Instead we get a baby crying in a small little town, that’s how all the hopes are met. Doesn’t make it less important, but it does show that God operates a little differently.

In a similar way, God tells us that this hope should be lived out a little differently too, and maybe not how we would expect. Will you pray with me?

_Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen._

If you were to imagine what the right response to the hope of Christ at Christmas should be, something like the shepherds from the fields comes to mind. They “make haste” to find him, and then once they do, they go back, “glorifying and praising God,” and the image that comes to my mind at least is of these exuberant shepherds running through the fields and hills and towns, singing “Go Tell It on the Mountain” at the top of their lungs. It’s joyful, it’s passionate, it’s excited, and maybe they did do some of that, but is that the whole story of how we should respond to the hope of Christ at Christmas?

Composure in the midst of excitement has a lot to do with the life of faith, the life of hope that Peter is talking about in this letter, and it has a lot to do with how our hope should be lived out.

In the part of the letter we just read, Peter is describing salvation in Christ foretold by the prophets. This wasn’t just a flash in the pan. It was the complete summation of all the prophesies and longing and fulfilments of Israel, and all of this leads up to, as v. 12 puts it, the “good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.” For Peter this salvation is a big deal. It’s a big deal everywhere in the Bible, but for Peter, it is cause for celebration. Just before this, he describes
this response to Christ as one of “indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Pretty lofty stuff. Very exciting. Someone might read this and be thinking, I am on fire right now. All my prayers have been answered, all my hopes realized. Those shepherds ain’t got nothing on me! Show me a wall, I’ll charge through it. Show me a mountain, I’ll climb it. Show me a race, I’ll run it. And that’s awesome. I hope you have that kind of zeal. When someone is new to faith, or even a renewed faith, there is often an energy and a passion to it that can at times be missing in someone for whom faith has been a constant over the years.

But with that energy, with that passion, can also come a recklessness, even a brashness, and it can take away from and hinder one’s progress and growth as a disciple.

In 6th grade, I played center for my little grade school football time—really that was probably the pinnacle of my athletic career. We didn’t exactly have a lot of Division I prospects on the roster, which was a big reason why it was me starting at center, but it also meant that we weren’t going to beat anyone just because we were naturally bigger or faster or more athletic. We had to use other tactics to get an edge in the game, and one of our old coach’s favorites was messing with the play count.

Guessing most already know what a center is, but just in case you don’t know football, the center is the one who at the beginning of each play snaps the ball back to the quarterback. And the play count is the verbal signal to the center to snap the ball and to the rest of the offense to start the play. But it all depends on the center (and everyone else) being on the same page. And that’s why getting the play count right was so important. Now, we’re talking 6th grade football here, so it’s not all that complicated, and most of time, the quarterback would just say, “Down, set, hut,” and “hut” would be the signal to snap the ball.

But, like I said, one of our old coach’s favorite things to do to get an edge was to mess with the play count, because defenses would get so used to “Down, set, hut,” or get so caught up in excitement for a big play that if you did something different, say snap the ball not on “hut” but on “hut 2,” the defense would jump offsides and you’d get a five free yards. And it shows what excitement and energy look like without discipline and composure.

And what Peter is talking about I think is getting down to just that combination, of energy on one hand, and composure on the other, both of which are so important in this conversation about hope. It’s important because when you first look at it, Peter seems to be saying things that are pulling in different directions.

In v. 13, the letter says, “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.” Three things in that verse. The third one should fall right into line. “Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.” Well, that’s what we’ve been talking about for this whole month, isn’t it? Hoping in Christ, even in our darkest hours. And now that this hope is fulfilled in Christ’s coming at Christmas, all the more reason to hope all the more at Christ’s coming again in glory. Lots of excitement. Lots of reasons to set all our hope on him.

But Peter says two other things that don’t seem to mix. First, “prepare your minds for action;” and then “discipline yourselves.”

The first of them, “prepare your minds for action” actually has a few layers of meaning. That phrase in your Bibles might have a little footnote next to it saying, “Gird up the loins of your mind.” That’s what the literal Greek phrase is saying, “Gird up the loins of your mind.” And “Prepare your minds for action” is a reasonable way to render it, but here’s why.
Girding up loins had to do with getting your clothing ready to move quickly. A man then would typically wear a simple tunic. But if one had to do hard labor or move quickly, that tunic would get in the way really quick. So, men would take their tunics, wrap them up around their legs and tie them off, giving them mobility and freedom for hard labor and fast movement—I’m tempted to try to do it with this robe, but I’m not that brave. That tying around their legs was called girding up your loins. It’s almost like saying, “Roll up your sleeves.”

So when Peter says to “gird up the loins of our minds,” it means “get your head right and ready to move.” There’s more preparation, there’s more movement, and with it, potentially more excitement, which is why it’s so telling that Peter follows this up by saying, “Discipline yourselves.” Because with every preparation getting ready to move quickly, ready to do some heavy work, there’s also instruction to do so carefully and methodically. But how on earth are we supposed to do both?

A mainstay in my car was a long podcast series about the Ancient Roman Republic and Empire, creatively called the History of Rome—it was the bane of Frances’ existence, but I liked it. And I remember one episode being dedicated entirely to Roman military tactics, talking about the Roman legion, and it was absolutely fascinating. One thing that stands out about the Roman legion is their discipline and training, so much so that while other armies would cry and shout and run as the lines charged together in battle, the Roman soldiers would move methodically and be nearly silent, except for the sound of the various officers’ orders. While other armies would hurtle headlong into the fray, the Romans kept in formation.

But then on the other hand, what distinguished the Romans from say, the Greek phalanx, which similarly kept formation and discipline but tended to do so as a single unit, was that the Romans would also be able to move around fluidly and change tactics and formations, all without breaking discipline or disrupting cohesion. Arguably the most long-term effective army in the ancient world.

There’s no shortage of irony in comparing Peter’s instructions to the faithful with the empire that ended up killing Peter, but the legion at least offers a glimpse of how discipline and energy and movement came together.

And I share that because a fair question at this point is, just how are we supposed to do all of this at once? In the life of faith, how are we supposed to be girding up the loins of our mind, preparing to move quickly and work, while at the same disciplining ourselves, while at the same time setting all our hope upon the grace of Christ?

As it turns out, Peter gives us the answer, but one that we often misunderstand. In v. 15, “Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.” I think often when we hear the word “holy,” especially when it’s about how we should be “holy,” we often think in terms of wearing a halo and not doing anything improper. And yes, there’s the sense in which being holy is indeed pure, so there’s a sense of abstention involved. But more than that, being holy is defining our activity not in our terms but in God’s terms. As God does, so should we do. As Christ does, so should we do.

As Christ came into the world humbly, not seeking fanfare or worldly glory, it means that being holy is to live humbly within the world as well. As Christ proclaimed justice and taught mercy and healed in the name of the kingdom of God, it means that being holy is living for that same justice, that same teaching, that same healing in the world, working for the kingdom Christ upholds. As Christ sacrificed himself, even unto death, it means being holy is giving of ourselves sacrificially. Being holy isn’t just avoiding things that are bad; it’s seeking to do what Christ does.
And on one hand, to do that would take a lot of preparation, a lot of energy, a lot of work and lot of movement, and so Peter wisely says, “Gird up the loins of your mind.” Get excited. Get ready to move. Get ready to work. Because this won’t be easy. It will take all of you. But on the other hand, to be holy would take a lot of self-control, reflection, and composure, and so Peter wisely says, “Discipline yourselves,” mind your actions, discern whether what you do testifies to the Lord’s glory and wisdom both.

It means let your movement and energy be stirred by what moves the Lord. If there is injustice, speak. If there is illness, heal. If there is sadness, comfort. If there is want, give. But it also means to do so in a way that is orderly, faithful, and sober-minded.

And why would we set about this seemingly impossible task? To earn God’s favor, to invite God to be with us, to demonstrate, “We are holy, therefore you can come to us”? No. God’s grace is already upon us; God has already come; God is indeed with us in Christ Jesus our Lord. And so Peter powerfully says, “Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.”

And it’s precisely because of that hope, that hope in Christ’s revelation, in Christ’s kingdom, in Christ’s grace, that this call to be holy means anything at all. Because we will fail on our own, but because of the hope to which we are drawn, our actions, our words, our thoughts are not just empty endeavors, but by faith build to the very hope that drives us.

And so as we move on past this Christmas, this tangible hope in Christ, gird up your loins, discipline yourselves, and live for what Christ lives for, give yourself for what Christ gave himself for, and live for that hope in holiness.

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