

Sunday, May 14, 2023 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church
Bible Study
“Always be Ready”
Psalm 66:8-20, Acts 17:22-31 and 1 Peter 3:13-22

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes).

Psalm 66:8-20. Context. This week’s psalm sings praises to God, especially for God’s liberation of the people at the time of the Exodus. But as the psalmist acknowledges, God’s ultimate liberation doesn’t mean that the path to it will be a cake walk. Indeed, it seems that those whom God will save, God will first test. Yet in the end, God will bring life out of death. For this reason, this psalm has sometimes been entitled, “Psalm of the resurrection.”

Acts 17:22-31. Context. Last week’s reading described the martyrdom of Stephen and recorded that one of the participants was a young man named Saul, a Pharisee who was a vigorous opponent and persecutor of the young Christian community. On his way to persecute the followers of Jesus in Damascus, he encountered the voice of the risen Christ who asked him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He had been blinded by a heavenly light and was brought to Ananias, a Christian in Damascus, where his sight returned – not just his physical sight, but his spiritual sight as well. From that point on, Saul – who eventually took the name Paul – became a vigorous proponent of the Christian faith, especially among those outside the Jewish tradition. He was the first to preach the gospel on the continent of Europe, and on one of his trips found himself in Athens, the intellectual capital of the Roman world. He was distressed to find it full of idols and took advantage of the opportunity to press his argument at the Areopagus, “Mars Hill,” a place where a judicial tribunal had met from ancient times to hear murder cases, and in Roman times, where it seems the ‘chattering class’ also gathered to debate and discuss the issues of the day.

1 Peter 3:13-22. Context. As David Bartlett writes in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (12, 290), “These verses remind us of what our whole study of the epistle has shown: First Peter was written for a community that was suffering slander, if not persecution, from an unbelieving world. The question Christians face is how to hold fast to the promise of God’s blessing and at the same time act appropriately toward those who are hostile to the faith.” As we read Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus, it almost seems as if Paul was taking his cue from the first half of this week’s reading from 1 Peter. The second half of the reading, however, contains a passage that remains largely obscure to the modern reader: the reference to Christ making a proclamation to the disobedient spirits from the time of Noah. This would appear to be a reference to the “sons of God” of Genesis 6 whose evil

acts had led to the universal destruction of the flood, and who in popular tradition had been “bound” in some realm beyond the earth, rather like the way at the beginning of Superman the enemies of Krypton are banished to the Phantom Zone. In 1 Peter, as Christ ascends to heaven he pauses to proclaim his once-and-for-all-time victory even over the most disobedient, evil spirits. The message for the reader is, if Christ so suffered and so conquered even these spirits, there is hope for us even as we suffer for our faith in God and Christ; and our victory is anticipated by our baptism. The number “8,” here referring to Noah, his wife, their three sons and their three wives, was also a number associated with the resurrection, said to have taken place on the “eighth” day. In many churches, the baptismal font will have eight sides.

Read Psalm 66:8-20, Acts 17:22-31 and 1 Peter 3:13-22 -

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn’t make sense to you in the text?

Read Psalm 66:8-20, Acts 17:22-31 and 1 Peter 3:13-22 again -

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, end by praying the following or a similar prayer:

Family of God, saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ and baptized into new life, as you leave this place, consider: how will you remain ready to live out your testimony of the living hope of the resurrection with your family, your friends, and your neighbors? **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord’s Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.