

Exiles: Finding Hope While Scattered

A Series on the Book of First Peter

Message 2 – “Claustrophobia”

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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One summer at seminary, we had a visiting professor who was very well-known, very highly regarded, and it seemed very friendly. The second day of the new semester, he was walking toward me in the hallway, his eyes were fixed on me and he greeted me excitedly with a hearty, “Good morning! How are you doing?” I was surprised that he recognized me from the full classroom the night before, but I was appreciative that he remembered me, and thankful for his friendliness. I hadn’t expected his question, so I automatically answered, “Fine, thanks. How about yourself?” He responded, “Oh, I don’t think about myself that much” and walked on. It was a set-up and I was had.

Okay, I admit it, I got taken. At first, I was a little embarrassed. “Was he implying that my answer was self-centered?” Or, was he using a customary greeting to show how so many of our cultural expressions are automatic, unthought-through, basically meaningless? Of course, because it bothered me, I replayed it over and over in my head trying to tease out whether there was something I missed or if my professor was just an immature jokester. He never explained himself.

But let me be very clear, the question, “How are you?” especially now, is a very important question that we must ask ourselves. I would argue that it is extremely important that we think this through. In fact, I think that it is the first step in us handling what we’re going through in a healthy manner. It is important that we each assess what thoughts, moods, feelings you’re having across this time. Now, please understand - there’s no right answer. In fact, you may have more than one answer. I know for myself that I’ve been all over the place in my thoughts and moods. It’s important I gauge my changing perspectives.

You see, we are all experiencing what sociologists call a **culturally disruptive moment**. And none of us will come out the other side of this experience unphased or unchanged by it. This is the kind of moment in life which we will all refer back to by asking, “Where were you when.....? We will all remember, and those memories will follow us. Being aware of how you are processing it now, is a step in handling it in a healthy fashion afterwards.

When you live through a
CULTURALLY DISRUPTIVE MOMENT
it marks you forever.

We've all been challenged and/or rattled by

- Feelings of Uncertainty
- Frustration of Inactivity
- Full awareness of Lack of Control

We feel stuck and static. Like we're walking in place; or treading water. We're unsettled. We might feel claustrophobic – I've felt like I'm in solitary confinement, exiled to my bedroom as my new makeshift home office. Our small apartment has never felt so small as it does now; now that all four of us are home ALL THE TIME!

I wrote down a few things that you might be feeling during this time:

- You might be overcome with fear (finances, work, school, future, running out of supplies)
- You might be bored with the monotony
- You might be frustrated by the restrictions
- You might be angry at the situation, the world, our leaders
- You might be finding yourself impatient, easily annoyed by being cooped up and not being able to get away!
- You might be tuning out, eating, sleeping, waiting...
- You might find yourself bingeing or staying up late watching reruns.... lost without your regular routines....
- You might be unable to eat, sleep, wait patiently....
- You may be on the verge of tears
- You might be lonely, hopeless, near the edge of your breaking point

All of these are understandable reactions to this unique situation we're facing - but we are all unique and so, you are privy to what is going on inside your own mind and heart, and part of your mental and emotional survival through and after this pandemic and lock-down will be based on knowing where you stand.

Peter is addressing a group of churches who also 'weren't in the driver's seat,' so to speak, were at the mercy of forces beyond themselvesdisplaced, disoriented, disrupted and discouraged. He calls them "scattered", "exiles, sojourners" going through unpleasant times (1 Peter 1:1, 6; 2:11). Expressions that describe our situation, too.

We might likewise be feeling unsettled, feeling at a loss to make something worthwhile out of what we're going through. But Peter tells the scattered, exiled church that although they're grieved by their present circumstances – he finds the NOW pregnant with opportunity, full of significance. What he says to them, applies to us now, too.

Now, don't misunderstand me. What Peter says is not to make us feel guilty, that we're feeling differently. Peter is sharing God's Word, it's not what any of us would have known. It is God's perspective – it is God's wisdom to encourage us by seeing or situation from His perspective.

Here's what he calls us to:

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 1 Peter 2:1-3

First of all, Peter tells us that **we're in a place for growth.**

We're going to see a pattern to Peter's instruction. He first tells us what NOT to do and then what we SHOULD do. Like the old expression, "Out with the old and in with the new." We could see his instructions as:

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.

HOMEWORK - dealing with relational struggles

Which is based on

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up..

HEARTWORK – desiring to know more about our sweet Lord

I think of it as 'homework' because, right now, if we're stuck with anyone during the self-quarantine it's immediate family. And, sometimes, we take our frustrations out on the one's closest to us. I have found that I'm a little short sometimes with people at home and Peter says relational strife is to be replaced with spiritual growth. The motive for spiritual growth is a previous experience of God's grace and goodness. Peter says that you've 'tasted' God's goodness and grace and you want more. He uses a strong verb, "to crave", "to yearn after" "to long" for spiritual milk. Some misunderstand Peter's command to apply to young Christians, however, that misunderstands his simile – he says that we are to be like an infant that craves milk for nourishment for your spiritual health. It could be argued that a mature Christian knows of his need for Jesus in a deeper fashion than a new convert. That craving to grow in grace grows with maturity. Notice, the desire to know Christ more is based on his sweet treatment of the believer. You've tasted of the goodness of the Lord and you want more!

Just a quick reminder – there are two ways to read the Bible. One is based on reading to see what God wants me to do. This regards the Bible as a book of do's and don'ts. But, the proper way to read and appreciate the Bible sees the Bible not as aimed at what I'm to do but rather

**The Bible is the story of GOD'S
revealing HIS Heart and HIS Plan for mankind.**

The Bible is not primarily about what God expects from us. It is primarily about GOD – showing us His character and concerns, and also what He has done for us.....and, only then, what we are to do in response!

Peter sees our scattered displacement as an opportunity for growth. He gets more specific when he talks about our growth in Godlikeness, another word for 'holiness.'

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:14-16)

We're not just in a holding-pattern, not just treading water, we have a golden opportunity for growth and growth in holiness. When we read our Bibles, the story about God's heart, we learn that God's salvation involved taking wayward children and restoring us as His beloved children. When we see such love, we want to become like him, sharing the family likeness. Being 'godlike' is called holiness. The background from the Old Testament shows two sides to the concept of holiness. Part of 'holiness' refers to God's moral purity, his righteousness and perfection. But 'holiness' also refers to being "set apart" for special use in service and worship of God. So, for instance utensils, plates, altars and certain foods are designated as 'holy' because they are used in the worship of God in both the tabernacle and the temple. These are 'holy' because they are reserved for, designated and dedicated to the service of God. In the same way, when our hearts are 'holy' to God they are 'wholly' dedicated to His service.

Peter highlights another aspect of what can be accomplished during these trying times, when he writes:

***But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
1 Peter 2:9***

This is a loaded verse, and it's hard to appreciate how the original churches that were struggling through persecution, social rejection, and having little clout in society would have heard these words. God's estimate of them was shockingly different than how they felt! Or how they were treated! And these words are true of us too!

- We are selected by Almighty God!
- We are Royalty! Related to the King of Kings!
- We are a Priesthood – offering worship to our God
- We are Holy - dedicated to Him, specially marked off for Him
- We are a race, a nation, a people – we're not on our own, individuals drawn to Jesus, we're a new family, we're a special community
- We are God's prized, treasured, possession

You may not realize this, but these were the very words that God spoke to Israel at Mount Sinai, right before God handed Moses the Ten Commandments, the Constitution of the new nation of Israel. What Peter is telling these displaced churches (and us), is that we are the new Israel, the new people of God. And as such, we're not stuck in a rut – no God is taking us on a journey just like He led Israel out of Egyptian bondage, wandering through dessert struggles on the way to the Promised Land.

As Christ followers, we have been redeemed by Jesus on the cross (like the Passover lamb in Egypt, 1 Peter 1:18-19), we are living through perilous times (like the tests in the wilderness, 1 Peter 1:6-7), God is present with us, as we make our way to the ultimate Promised Land, heaven where Jesus will be revealed in all his glory, honor and praise (1 Peter 1:3-5,13).

All of this, so that

...we may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9b)

There is a connection between what we said earlier, craving for more of the Lord by growing in Him and sharing our faith. You see, when we make our relationship with Jesus our first priority, when it becomes our delight, what we cherish, we will automatically talk about him. It's a rule of human behavior – "***the mouth speaks of the overflow of the heart***" said Jesus (Matthew 12:34). You can always tell what a person really cares about because they will inevitably talk about it. A guy loves sports, what will he rave about? A woman loves quilting, she'll share about her artwork. When a person craves the sweetness of their relationship with the Lord, and it becomes his lifeblood, the song of his heart, the meditation of his mind, and the script for his lifestyle, he will naturally share about his Love.

As we talk about how we're 'surviving' this pandemic with the community around us who is sharing this disruption, sharing about how our Loving Lord is with us through it all, should spill out of our hearts through our lips.