

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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## 1 Peter 1:3-9 (NRSV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, [5] who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

[6] In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, [7] so that the genuineness of your faith--being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

[8] Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, [9] for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

## MIND RENEWAL

We've heard the old saying. "He's so heavenly minded that he's of no earthly good." But, this morning our Scripture passage turns that saying on its head. A summary of today's passage might be this. "In order to be any earthly good we have to be heavenly minded."

Throughout the Bible conversion is called a "new birth." Several Sundays ago we talked about that famous passage in which Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be "born again" or "born from above."

Some of the political candidates this year are talking about the need for change and how words matter. That's true not only in politics but also when it comes to spiritual growth. I like the way the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ..." (Romans 12:2)

Rebirth begins when God's Spirit changes how we think about ourselves and the world around us. Words do matter, and it especially matters what we really believe in our hearts about God and about ourselves.

When I was doing psychotherapy, one of the most helpful concepts was the idea that our self talk is important. If we constantly fill our minds with negative thoughts and ideas, then we're going to get depressed.

Try this some time. When you get angry or sad or afraid, write down what you're thinking about yourself on a piece of paper. Don't censor anything. Just write it down quickly. Do this for a week.

And then go back a week later and read what you have written and ask yourself, "Is this really true? Are these thoughts in line with who God says I am?"

Rebirth begins when the resurrection becomes more than just a story about what happened to Jesus long ago. Rebirth begins when the resurrection becomes a story about what happens to us here and now. Rebirth begins when resurrection becomes a part of our daily conversation.

Or to put in terms of my thesis for today,

“In order to be any earthly good we have to be heavenly minded.” In order to be live life to the fullest, we must live like the people we are called to be in Christ Jesus.

## NEW BIRTH

Whenever a baby is born, everything changes. Some of you know that very well. I remember that when my first child was born, the nurses in the delivery room delighted in calling me “daddy”. That was true of course. I was a new father. But, that title sure did seem strange! As one member of my Bible study group put it, “It dawned on me that I was responsible for this new life, and I felt totally and absolutely unprepared.”

Those who have experienced the wonder and the fear of a new birth understand that statement. A new birth changes things forever in a family. Some of the changes might be good and some of the changes might be bad. But, one thing is for sure. Life will never be the same after a new birth.

That little word “daddy” changed my life forever. I had a new role to play in life. I couldn’t be as selfish. I had to think about the future in a new way.

And each new stage of life is both enhanced and complicated by the new birth that happened many years ago.

The Bible tells us that the same is true of our spiritual birth. That new birth changes things in our life. We are part of a new community formed not by flesh and blood but by the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

According to our Scripture from 1 Peter, as Christ rose from the dead so we are given a living hope. We are given a hope that cannot be destroyed.

## THE COST OF NEW BIRTH

But, as I’ve noted a new birth is not always a welcome event. New birth is costly. New birth requires sacrifice. New birth can change the way we live.

And that was certainly true for those who had been born again as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes these new converts lost their jobs. Sometimes these new disciples had to give up their families because they were disowned.

Sometimes these new disciples went from being law abiding citizens to mistrusted “troublemakers” because of their commitment to Christ.

Most commentators agree that the people to whom 1 Peter was written were undergoing tremendous persecution. We talk about undergoing trials and tribulations, and certainly many of us do struggle in various ways throughout our life. Some of us have poor health. Some of us are filled with grief over the loss of a loved one. Some of us have significant troubles with our personal relationships.

But, this is not what Peter is talking about. Peter is not talking about why bad things happen to good people. Peter is not talking about Shakespeare’s “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”.

Peter is talking about honest to goodness persecution.

Many of us at Bible study frankly admitted that we hadn’t really experienced anything like the persecution experienced by the early church. The trials of the early church were so great that it is even hard for us to imagine what it was like. The churches when Peter wrote his letter were at the beginning of a historical period during which the followers of Christ would be killed in terrible ways. Powerful politicians were determined to destroy the Christian faith.

## REFINED BY FIRE

And yet it is a historical fact that the harder the powers that be tried to destroy the church the stronger it became. There was a saying in the early church that the “blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.” Christianity grew and flourished in the most unlikely soil of persecution.

What Peter suggested in this letter became a reality. The faith of the early church was increased by the trials that they were forced to endure. The genuineness of their faith was proved instead of being destroyed by the fire. Their faith became like refined gold. It was all the more precious because of what they had suffered.

The Bible tells us that the example of those early Christians is a testament to the power of the resurrection.

Peter acknowledged that they had not seen Christ, but despite that fact they loved him, believed in him, and rejoiced in him. They were the first generation who had not witnessed the ministry of Christ for themselves.

But, the Spirit of Christ was with them in a marvelous way.

They were examples of what the Bible means when it says that we walk “by faith and not by sight”.

## UNJUST SUFFERING

Many in our Bible studies struggled with the idea that God would allow suffering to come into our lives. Indeed, we often wonder if unjust suffering is a sign that God is not with us and for us.

Some of you may remember that several weeks ago we talked about this viewpoint. The disciples of Jesus, when they saw a man born blind, believed that either this man had to be a great sinner himself or his parents must have sinned in some terrible way. Why else would God bring such a terrible punishment into his life?

But, Jesus said that neither the man nor his parents had sinned. This normal tragedy was an opportunity for God to demonstrate in a special way his gracious love through the healing power of Christ.

We make a basic theological mistake if we say that God is the author of suffering. Suffering comes from two sources.

We experience suffering first of all because we are human. We are mortal and weakness and suffering is a part of the human condition. And second we experience suffering because men and women often sin and treat fellow human beings in an inhumane way.

Today we’re talking primarily about the suffering caused by human beings.

How do we think about that kind of suffering? Why doesn’t God do something about it? Why doesn’t God intervene more directly? Where is God when unjust suffering occurs?

## JOSEPH AND THE CROSS

Two stories from the Bible help me begin to understand this difficult issue.

The first story is about Joseph. Joseph you'll remember was sold into slavery by his brothers. This was just the beginning of a long and difficult struggle for poor Joseph. But, finally, because God enabled Joseph to understand Pharaoh's dream, Joseph was given charge of Egypt's granaries during a time of famine. And those brothers who had caused such suffering showed up in Egypt looking for food.

Joseph gave them food and even moved the whole family down to Egypt. But, the brothers never really believed that Joseph had forgiven them. They thought that when their father, Jacob died that Joseph would take his revenge, and they said as much when old Jacob finally died.

But, Joseph had a different interpretation of his suffering. He told his brothers that though they meant it for evil God used it for good. God overrules evil by using it for good.

And of course the second story that helps us understand suffering is the story of the cross. The cross is a testament to the suffering caused by human beings. And the empty cross is a testament to the power of God to bring salvation to his people despite the reality of unjust suffering.

## GOD, DANCE AND JAZZ

One commentator put it this way, "... while suffering is not part of God's desire it is not outside of God's sovereignty." God is not the author of unjust suffering, but God is with us in our suffering and uses that suffering for his own purposes.

Part of the fun of playing jazz or dancing is the necessity of improvising. In order for couples to move around on a dance floor it is necessary to use your knowledge of basic dance steps in order to avoid a disastrous collision while also creating an interesting dance. Dance is a kind of conversation with your partner and the other people on the dance floor.

In order to play jazz it is necessary to use a basic knowledge of music theory in order to make up a musical riff on the spot that will fit with what the other

musicians are playing. Again, it is a kind of spontaneous conversation with other musicians to transform what is happening at the moment.

These are small examples of how I understand how God works in the world. God is spontaneously in a dance or a musical conversation with a world that is off beat, out of time with His will. God uses sinful and broken people to make something beautiful.

God uses suffering to deepen faith. God uses tragedy as an opportunity to comfort. God uses sickness as an opportunity to heal. God used a cross as a means of salvation for the sins of the whole world.

## EXPECTATION AND PRESENT LIFE

The battle has not been won. There is still unjust suffering. There is still tragic death and illness. There are still those who insist on sounding the horn of confusion or stepping on someone else's toes at every opportunity.

But, Christians are those who refuse to dance to the world's music. We hear a different drummer. We dance to a different melody. We are a part of God's dance of grace, the dance first revealed in Jesus. This dance is our salvation.

We dream of a new heaven and a new earth. We believe that we have an inheritance of eternal life in heaven. But, in the Spirit filled life we have already received a down payment on that inheritance. We believe that God is doing something new in our world today, and we get to help.

Expectations about the future have a great influence on our behavior today. For example, if you think that house prices are going to fall even farther, you're not going to buy a house today. If you believe that the stock market is going to take a tumble, you're not going to invest today. If you think that this life is all there is, you're going to try and preserve what you have at all costs.

But, if you believe that this life is only the beginning, if you're heavenly minded, then you're going to approach life today differently. Life is not just a short struggle for survival. Life is just the beginning. Life is a warm up before receiving an even greater inheritance that is stored safely away for us in heaven.

## THE PORTAL OF DEATH

Have you ever wondered about the nature of that heavenly inheritance? The late Jesuit Priest, Henri Nouwen wrote about a brief foray into that eternal realm after having a severe accident several years ago. As Henri was walking along a road a van passed too close and struck him with one of its rear view mirrors.

Henri knew that he was hurt very badly, and the doctors determined that because of serious internal bleeding they would have to operate immediately. At this point Henri began to consider the possibility that he might die, and he went where he had never been before, a place he called the “portal of death”.

Henri thought that this would be a fearful place, but much to his surprise it was not that way at all. He wrote, “When I entered the portal of death, I experienced what I had never experienced before: pure and unconditional love ... what I encountered was an intensely personal presence that pushed all my fears aside. It was a very gentle, non-judging presence, a presence that simply asked me to trust completely.”

He said that there was a strong feeling of “coming home” and the words of Jesus to his disciples became very real. “There are many rooms in my Father’s house ... I am going now to prepare a place for you.” He continued,

“The Risen Jesus, who now dwells with the Father, was welcoming me home after a long journey. My homecoming had a real quality of return, a return to the womb of God. The God who had fashioned me in secret and molded me in the depths of the earth and the God who had knitted me together in my mother’s womb, was calling me back and wanted to receive me as someone who had become child enough to be loved as a child.”

After several weeks Henri’s doctor told him how close to death he had really been. She said his spleen was like an island swimming in a sea of blood. In fact he ended up losing nearly two thirds of his blood supply. She quite frankly wondered if Henri would make it, but the talented surgeon was somehow able to get the bleeding stopped and take out the spleen. The doctor said, “He saved your life.”



At that moment Henri remembered the words of the nurse when he first awoke in the recovery room. She said, “You better be thankful to him.” He thought that she had been referring to this surgeon, but when he asked, she said that she was referring to God.

Many of us are interested in these subjective accounts of near-death experiences. They seem to confirm that there is a connection between the beginning of life and the end of life. We come from God into this world and when we leave this world we return, childlike to him.

### SPEAKING FROM ETERNITY TO TIME

In days gone by people often talked about heaven, and the coming of God’s kingdom. But, today this is not so much the case.

Some theologians suggest that we need to forget about heaven, that such talk is often used to delay the kingdom of righteousness and justice that should come here and now. Heavenly talk makes us too passive, waiting for pie in the sky by and by. Or, to quote Karl Marx, “religion is the opiate of the people.”

But, as you might expect, I disagree strongly. A true understanding of our inheritance in heaven does not breed passivity or injustice. On the contrary, this future hope invigorates our present and gives us the confidence we need to continue the struggle in the midst of life’s trials. This eternal hope led Peter to write to the early church that the trials they suffered would not destroy them. Instead, they would be strengthened by the struggle.

I vote for Peter instead of Karl Marx. I believe that we need to reflect more on our eternal inheritance. When we have a clear view of the eternal hope that is ours in Christ Jesus, we are reborn. Our whole life will change. We will know in a personal way what the Apostle Paul once wrote, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

When Henri Nouwen learned that he would not die, his friends came to see him and expressed joy and gratitude that their friend would be okay. But, strangely enough at first Henri was confused by it all. He was returning to a world that he had released, and he asked, “Why am I alive? Why has God

asked me to return to this place where love is so ambiguous, peace so hard to experience and joy so deeply hidden in sorrow?”

After reflection he decided that he was being asked to proclaim the love of God in a new way. He said, “Until now I had been thinking and speaking from time to eternity, from a passing reality to a lasting reality, from the experience of human love to the love of God ... but after touching the ‘other side’ it seems that a new proclamation is needed—a proclamation into the place of ambiguities from the place of unconditional love.”

To put it another way, we need to be a people who live with one foot in heaven. We are heavenly minded in order to do the earth some good. This is what Jesus meant when he said that we should be “in the world but not of the world.” He meant that a pure lifestyle is informed by a heavenly outlook.

We are citizens of a different kingdom, and that makes all the difference.

This past week I did a wedding for a lovely couple from England. Soon after they arrived the young groom received a call from a telemarketer who proclaimed, “You’re very lucky. You’ve just won a new car.”

But, the young man from Wales was not about to fall for that one. He replied, “How could this be? I’m not a citizen of this country, and I’ve only been here for twelve days.” Since he was a citizen of another country, he was not about to fall for the telemarketer’s pitch.

And in the same way, if we recognize (as Jesus told Pilate) that God’s kingdom is not of this world, we will not fall for all the phony lines that the world gives us. We are part of a kingdom that comes; we are heavenly minded.

And that makes all the difference in how we live today.

Amen.