

**“A Living Hope”**

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

1Peter 1:1-9

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,  
To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and  
Bithynia, <sup>2</sup> who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and  
sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled  
with his blood:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

<sup>3</sup> 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 resurrec-  
tion of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that is imper-  
ishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who are being  
protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be re-  
vealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while  
you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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, <sup>9</sup> for you are receiving the outcome of  
your faith, the salvation of your souls.

**GOD’S CHOSEN STRANGERS**

You may remember that when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at  
Pentecost there were Jews from all over the ancient world who had come  
to celebrate, including residents of Cappadocia and Asia.

It’s likely that some of the Jews who were converted by Peter’s sermon  
came back to this region and spread the Christian faith.

But, there was a problem.

These Christians had a faith commitment and a lifestyle that made them quite different from the society in which they lived.

Peter referred to these Christians as the “exiles of the dispersion who had been chosen by God”. One translation refers to these Christians as “God’s chosen strangers”.

When we live in a place, we naturally want to feel like we fit in ... that we are a part of that community. But, in this case these Christians didn’t fit in with their community because of their faith.

They were resident aliens.

They were not “at home” in the place where they lived.

## ALIENS IN OUR OWN COMMUNITY

There are many examples in our own community of what it means to be a resident alien.

I think of people who come here speaking a language other than English. An inability to communicate undoubtedly keeps these folks from feeling like they’re really a part of the community.

There are also many people in our community who have a different religion. They dress differently, and their customs often make people suspicious. I’m sure that sometimes they do not feel welcome in the place where they live.

I’ve found that people who make Central Florida their retirement home find that they have difficulty making friends and adjusting. They find their place in the sun is just hot and miserable.

There are other people who come here to get a new job and maybe start over in life.

But, often they feel disconnected from their roots and discouraged by their financial circumstances.

All of these folks are resident aliens.

They live in our own community, but they don't feel like they're a part of our community.

## MISSION INSIGHT

Representative of Presbytery's Committee on Ministry are going to visit with our Session this Tuesday. And in preparation for that visit we read some demographic data from a firm called Mission Insight.

That group made some predictions about our community that have some important implications for our church.

In the coming years our diverse community is going to become even more diverse.

We will be welcoming people from all over the country and all over the world.

But, many of these folks will not feel like they are part of our community... nor will many of these people have a faith commitment of any kind.

They will have lower than average incomes, and they will have little time for volunteer activities. (After all, when you have to work two jobs in order to make ends meet, you're pretty well exhausted and treasure any free time that you get.)

Some people who have lived in Central Florida for many years think that all this change is making them feel like foreigners in their own home town.

Prominent long time residents have moved elsewhere in search of a better place to live.

I've been here for about 20 years and in just that brief period of time I've seen tremendous changes in our community, and I must admit that not all of those changes were for the better.

This Tuesday the representatives from the Committee on Ministry are going to point to this data and ask our session,

"How do you plan on doing ministry in this brave new world? How are you going to proclaim the gospel to people, who for one reason or another, feel like they don't belong?"

## A MESSAGE FROM THE HOMELESS TO THE HOMELESS

Good question.

I think today's Scripture lesson might give us a clue.

One commentator said that this letter was written "from the homeless to the homeless."

The Christians in Asia Minor did not feel at home where they lived. But, that was true of Christians everywhere in the ancient world. The Christian way of life was at odds with the ways of the world.

And that's still true.

Christians have always been and will always be, in a certain sense, "exiles".

If you want to fit in, don't be a Christian.

Christians definitely march to the beat of a different drummer.

Christians will always feel like exiles in their own community. Christians will always be resident aliens.

But, if you're not satisfied with where you are in life, you might consider the advantage of being a resident alien.

Faith often begins when we're not comfortable with our life and the place where we live.

Faith often begins when we feel like foreigners in our own home town.

Faith begins when we are dissatisfied.

How do those feelings encourage faith?

Those feelings encourage faith because those feelings make us willing to move.

Now I'm not talking about packing up and moving to Texas.

I'm talking about becoming a "wayfaring stranger."

I'm talking about having the kind of faith that caused Abraham to seek a city with a different foundation, a city whose architect and builder was God.

(Hebrews 11:10)

I'm talking about a willingness to remain in exile with other exiles in order to proclaim the promises of God.

In a place like this, in a place where people feel disconnected and all alone, Christians have an opportunity. We have a message that offers hope and a sense of belonging and a love that will not let us go.

## CHOSEN

Peter told the Christians in Asia Minor that though they were exiles; they were also chosen and destined by God.  
That's true of us as well.

It's no accident that we're in this place.  
God has chosen us, and God has a plan for our life here and now.

More than that, our life is not defined by circumstances.  
Our life is not defined by the culture in which we live.  
Our life is not defined by the job that we have (or don't have).

Our life is defined by what God in Christ has already done for us..  
Peter told these resident aliens were chosen by God that they have been "sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood".

Put another way, God chooses us, God forgives us and God frees us to live a new life.

This is not a life based upon the fear and anger that is so prevalent in our society.  
According to Peter's greeting in verse one, the Christian life based upon "grace and peace".

No matter where you live; if you preach a message of grace and peace, you will be a resident alien. You will not fit in with your community.

But, that's a good thing.  
Because we have been chosen to be different.  
We have been chosen to preach the grace and peace of God in a world that is not gracious or peaceful.

You see, as Christians, we find our home not in where we live. Our home is in what we believe. We rest our souls in the promises of God.

And through the power of the Holy Spirit this brings all kinds of people together.

As was illustrated at Pentecost, language and culture are no longer barriers because the Spirit enables us to speak the common language of God's grace and God's peace.

## A LIVING HOPE

How can this be?

What can change resident aliens into brothers and sisters?

It is the resurrection.

Peter told these exiles that the resurrection of Jesus changed things forever.

In the resurrection they had been give a "new birth into a living hope".

As I pointed out last week, resurrection is about more than something that happened long ago. It is about something that happens here and now. Resurrection transforms the lives of disciples.

The risen Christ met his disciples in Galilee and by the power of the Spirit He transformed who they were and what they were able to do.

The risen Christ still does that.

Resurrection, according to this passage, is a "living hope".

Resurrection changes us.

Resurrection brings new life.

Resurrection gives resident aliens an eternal home.

Resurrection makes us members of God's own household.

## THE INHERITANCE

In our lesson Peter also talks about the future.

He refers to an inheritance from God that is ours in heaven.

This recalls the promises made to the people of Israel.

Their inheritance from God was the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

And God promised that he would make of them a great nation.

But, now God's people (including some of the early Christians) live far from home.

The Promised Land, their inheritance lay in ruins ... subject to the whims of a foreign power.

Their inheritance had been spoiled.

It had perished and faded away.

And yet all was not lost.

Though they lived far from home among a people who rejected and scorned them, Peter reminded these faithful "exiles" that they had an "inheritance" in heaven.

This inheritance would not perish, would not be defiled and would not fade away.

To put it another way, the promises of God have no expiration date.

They are eternal.

We have already learned that the resurrection brings God's people a "living hope". The resurrection gives God's people a sense of grace and peace for the living of these days.

In the same way, the promise of heaven also gives us strength for the living of these days.

The benefits of eternity begin today.

The heavenly promises of God bolster our confidence and trust.

It's another way of saying what Paul said in his letter to the Romans (8:31), "If God is for us, who is against us?"

We may feel like exiles.

We may feel like resident aliens where we live.

But, we can trust our lives and our future to the grace of God.

## TRIALS AND TRUST

When trials come our way, our faith often waivers.  
We assume the worst and act accordingly.

But, suppose we assumed the best and acted accordingly?  
Suppose we trusted, in good times and in bad, that God was with us and for us?

Suppose we believed that God can be counted on to rescue us today and in the future? Suppose we believed that it was possible to have faith even when we suffer?

That's hope as it is described in the Bible.  
Biblical hope is not wishful thinking.  
Biblical hope does not depend upon circumstances.

Biblical hope is confidence that is grounded in the character of God and God's saving actions in Jesus Christ. Again, the words of a hymn from my Southern Baptist childhood comes to mind.

"Because He lives I can face tomorrow.  
Because he lives all fear is gone.  
Because I know who holds the future.  
And life is worth the living, just because He lives."

That's pretty well summarizes it.  
Resurrection is a living hope, and heaven is a promise for today and tomorrow.

Now does this mean we can avoid all suffering if we just have enough faith?

Of course not. In verse 6 of today's lesson, Peter points out that suffering will come to the Christians in Asia Minor.

And suffering will come to us as well.  
Suffering is unavoidable.  
Suffering is part of the human condition.

And sometimes those who are faithful, take up a cross and suffer for the faith.

But, this doesn't mean that God has abandoned us. Instead, suffering provides an opportunity for us to test and prove our faith. The example often used in the Bible is the refining of a precious metal by fire.

Peter tells us that faith is much more precious than gold. And its strength is increased through the time of testing.

I think this is a spiritual principle that is easier to see and accept when we look back on our lives.

When I'm suffering, when I'm struggling, I have a hard time having faith. But, often, years later when I reflect on that experience, I can see the hand of God lifting me up and carrying me through those difficult times.

There used to be an elaborate illustration that many of you no doubt had as a refrigerator magnet for many years entitled "Footprints in the Sand".

The gist of that illustration is that God carries us through the tough times. When we struggle, when we need to be saved, it gives us an opportunity to trust God in a new way.

Now don't misunderstand. Suffering is still suffering. It's not some sort of spiritual aerobics that's good for us.

I do not agree with that old saying... "whatever doesn't kill us will make us stronger".

Suffering is painful. Even the risen Christ had nail scarred hands and a wound in his side. Suffering often wounds us deeply, and the scars can stay with us the rest of our life.

But, the joy of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is stronger than suffering. Indeed, as we remember this first Sunday after Easter, God's salvation in Jesus Christ is even stronger than death itself.

## LEARNING TO SEE

We see signs of that salvation today.

Sometimes people are healed as a sign of that coming Kingdom where there will be no suffering or pain.

Sometimes hardened sinners fall to their knees and rise to live in a whole new way.

Sometimes exiles in a strange land are gracious and peaceful toward those who mistreat them. Their suffering becomes an opportunity to proclaim the gospel to those who are far away from God.

God is still at work in our world in so many ways.  
It's all a matter of learning to see the world in a new way.

I read this week about a woman who taught art at a liberal arts college. The vast majority of her students didn't have much talent. They just had to take a core course in art.

A friend once asked this teacher if that ever discouraged her. She said, "I am excited about teaching my students to understand and see beauty. I want to teach them to see the world in a way so that they will never be bored again."

I think that's the goal of Scripture.

When we look at the world through the lens of God's grace, we see things in a new way.

We find beauty and hope.

We see evidence of the resurrection at every turn, and we are never bored again.

Some of you may be familiar with C.S. Lewis's children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

It's a fairy tale with a rather heavy theological underpinning.

In one story, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy finds herself in a spooky old house.

She is a bit afraid but explores her surroundings anyway.

And at one point she finds a very old book. She opens it and finds one page that is blank except for some words at the top. The heading reads, "A spell to make invisible things visible."

She was not so sure she ought to try it but she does.

And she hears someone coming up behind her.

She turns around and sees her beloved Lion, Aslan.

"Oh, Aslan, it was kind of you to come" Lucy says.

But Aslan had not come from anywhere. The lion says,

"I've been here all the time but you've made me visible".

The deeper meaning of this story is plain enough.

The lion, Aslan represents Christ, and he was with Lucy all the time even though she couldn't see him.

In our own lives there will be times when we feel alone and scared.

Christ will seem far from us.

But, today's lesson teaches us that it's not true.

We live in the presence of God in good times and bad.

The resurrection is a living hope.

And heaven is a present reality as well as a future inheritance.

God Himself is with us.

May He give us eyes to see.

Amen.