

Today we are going to begin a 6 week sermon series on the First Letter of Peter. I think we may find that we connect pretty well to this letter because it is written to a group of Christians in various churches in Asia Minor who are feeling some pressure about being Christians and members of their various small churches.

These Christians are not undergoing religious persecution at the hands of the government authorities. We do find that kind of intense persecution in the writer of the book of Revelation. The Christians that Peter writes to in this letter are people who are facing some pressure from their friends. Friends who want these Christians to go back to their former lifestyles.

We will be told in the opening sentence that the writer of this letter is Peter. He does not use his proper name Simon which is what he is called in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. He goes by his nickname "Petros" which is the Greek form of the original Aramaic "Cephas."

There is debate about whether or not the apostle Peter is the actual writer of this letter. People who are a lot smarter than I am have looked at the content of this letter and decided that it was written toward the end of the 1st Century by a follower of Peter who wrote in Peter's name. For clarity, I will refer to the writer as Peter.

I will be reading from the NIV version of the Bible. We will be told that this letter is written to God's elect who are strangers in the world. The NRSV version begins by saying that this letter is written to the exiles of the Dispersion. Calling them exiles of the dispersion is probably more accurate because Peter is going to use the Old Testament language that had been applied to Israel and apply it to his version of the modern church.

Peter uses Old Testament images to describe what the church is facing today. But even though the NRSV version is probably more accurate, I am going to read the NIV because I think the term strangers is a term which is more easily understood by us today.

Many of us feel like strangers or exiles in the world where we live. If you have ever felt that being a part of this church or being a Christian has alienated you from someone else and made you feel like an exile or stranger, then First Peter may be a letter in the Bible that you can relate to.

I do begin this series on 1st Peter with some hesitancy I must admit. When we get deeper into the letter we will discover words about husbands and wives that may make some of us squeamish. 1st Peter is not politically correct. But we are not going to avoid those texts about the roles of wives and husbands but we will meet them head on.

Read I Peter 1: 1-9

Being a Clemson graduate and before that being a Clemson fan, college basketball has for the most part been a time of great anguish. Just recently Bob Geis and I, along with his brother-in-law and my son James, attended the Pitt/Clemson basketball game in Littlejohn Coliseum. James and I had on our Clemson orange while Bob had on his Pitt black and gold.

Clemson led by 5 points with 5 seconds to play. I said to Bob, Clemson will find a way to lose. They usually do. And sure enough, Pitt hits a 3 pointer, steals the inbounds pass, sinks the shot at the buzzer, the game goes into overtime and Pitt wins the game. So as a Clemson graduate it is with agony that I share a story about UNC basketball. Because as a child I watched numerous times when the Dean Smith coached Tar Heels excelled on the court.

Church consultant Peter Steinke tells the story about having the opportunity to watch a North Carolina basketball game in Texas. North Carolina, like they usually seemed to do, eked out a victory in the final minutes of the game. Steinke was introduced to Dean Smith after the game and he had a chance to ask the coach some questions about the game.

Steinke asked Smith why he left freshmen Scott Williams in the game when the coach knew that he would be fouled and forced to go to the free throw line. Steinke knew that this would put a lot of pressure on the freshman. Without hesitation, Dean Smith replied, “How else is Scott going to learn how to handle those situations unless he is put in those tough situations?”

Like I shared earlier, some of us may be feeling some pressure in our lives to not be an active Christian. Maybe friends who came to know you outside of the Christian faith are pressuring you. Friends who know you through a lifestyle that some consider to not be Christian. Friends who know you through activities which some Christians snobbishly frown upon. Being here may make you feel as though you are a bit strange or an exile.

Some of us may be feeling as though we are an exile by being a part of Allison Creek Presbyterian Church. Maybe you have friends who are part of the fun and hip church down the road. I mean how many Elevation car stickers does one have to pass and hear about how many people attend worship there.

Maybe your decision to stick with this congregation as we move forward into the future has some of your friends questioning your sanity. Why do you want to be a part of that church? There are other churches that are more spiritual, biblical, faithful or whatever terms you have heard thrown out about this church.

Recently someone was by my office and they commented to me that they like their preacher because he preaches from the Bible. The person who said this to me is a person who is a really good and faithful Christian. So I said to this person, “well thank God someone around here preaches from the Bible.”

So maybe 1st Peter is written to you and to me. Maybe being here today does make you feel as though you are an exile or a stranger. If you feel as though you are an exile or a stranger then you are in good company because Peter writes a letter just for you and for me.

So what does Peter have to say to us? Peter says that God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. From the dead. Jesus Christ gives us new life from the dead. That is some pretty powerful stuff. Jesus Christ gives us new life from the dead.

We don't have to live like dead people. We are invited to live like people of the resurrection. And what do people of the resurrection live like? According to Peter, people of the resurrection live like people who look toward God and to heaven toward a salvation that will be revealed in the future. People of the resurrection are not people who are consumed by the past but people who are focused on the future.

Those voices who are questioning why you are a Christian and those voices who question why you are a part of this church are voices which are trying to call you back into the past. These voices are calling you back into a past because they liked the relationship that they had with you in the past. That relationship worked for them. But it may not have worked for you.

But even though we are surrounded by voices calling us to relationships of the past we are not people of the past. Being a Christian who is seeking to grow in their relationship to Christ means a calling to live into the future. A future where God is calling you and me to be a new creation with new and healthy relationships that are future oriented and not past oriented.

Living into this future relationship with Christ does not mean that life will be happy all the time. There is a song that the preschoolers sometimes sing in chapel on Thursday morning and I am beginning to question the theology of it. It claims that since “Jesus Christ came in, and saved my life from sin, I am happy all the time.” That’s not been my experience of the faith journey. Sometimes, many times, I am not happy.

And Peter in his letter seems to recognize that following Christ will actually lead you into being an exile or a stranger. Peter says that following Christ will lead you into times of trial. Following Christ will lead you into experiences which will not leave you happy all the time. Following Christ will lead you into experiences where you will question the wisdom of continuing to follow this Christ.

But when we come to those times of trial, I invite us to remember the wisdom by one of the greatest coaches of all time. When asked why he left the freshman in to shoot game winning free throws, Dean Smith calmly responded, “Well how else is he going to learn how to handle those situations unless he is in those difficult situations.”

Following Christ will lead you into feeling as though you are an exile and a stranger. And it is during those times when it may be hard to see God. But hear these words from Peter, “although you do not see God now you still believe in God and you still rejoice for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your soul.”

Keep focused ahead as we journey as exiles and strangers. AMEN.

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-Steinke, Peter, *“How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems”*, Alban, 1993, p. 110

-Given: April 27, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)