

***Chosen to Be Part of God's Story***  
**A Sermon on 1 Peter 1:1-12**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**April 23, 2017**

**Introduction**

Sometimes it is good for us to get out of our comfort zone. That is one of the benefits of the lectionary; it forces us to cover texts that we wouldn't otherwise consider. So, for our next six sermons, Mary and I are going to preach about 1 Peter.

I have never studied 1 Peter or preached on it. Two weeks ago I couldn't remember a single verse, let alone tell you the gist of the letter.

Parts of it seem offensive at first reading. There are household codes, encouraging wives to submit to their husbands and slaves to submit to their masters. The author understands the Christian community as the new Israel and the Hebrew prophets as prophesying about Christ, which the tradition used in later centuries as a polemic against Jews. The challenge for us is to see if we can hear any good news in those passages without embracing patriarchy or hierarchy or supercessionism.

That is typical of that part of the New Testament that is known as the Catholic letters. Those are the last seven letters in the New Testament immediately before Revelation: James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, and 1, 2 and 3 John. None of the letters are written by Paul or by someone writing under Paul's name. They are called Catholic letters because, unlike Paul's letters, they are not written to a particular church or a particular person. They are written to the catholic or universal church. The Catholic letters likely are the last things written in the New Testament, from the late first century to the early second century. They are not as radical as the Gospels or Paul's letters; some of the Catholic letters seem to try to smooth out the radical edges of the gospel. They reflect a time when there was more concern about the structure of the church: we hear about elders and bishops, which are missing from the Gospels and Paul. Part of the household codes in 1 Peter is for parishioners to obey their bishops.

As I have studied 1 Peter the last two weeks, I have been surprised to discover how much good news it contains. Mary and I hope to share that good news with you over the next six weeks.

## **First Move: A Greeting to Resident Aliens**

Today's text contains the salutation and the thanksgiving, the first two parts of ancient letters. I will be relying heavily on the commentaries of Gene Boring and Fred Craddock, two Disciples scholars who began their careers by teaching at Phillips University in Enid.

The first two verses are a salutation. The English word *salutation* is derived from the Latin word, *salus*, which means "greetings, good health." We are casual about salutations today. We skip the introduction of ourselves and begin by addressing the recipient. Emails simply begin "Anne:". They get right down to business. Letters begin with "Dear John." Letter writing was more formal in ancient times. A typical salutation in the Greek and Roman world would have been: "Peter, to the churches in Asia, greetings."

The author introduces himself simply as Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. He does not elaborate on his call or his function as an apostle, as Paul does. This is probably someone from Peter's community in Rome writing under Peter's name. According to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down in Rome in 63 or 64 C.E. Most scholars believe this letter was written at least three decades after that. I will refer to the author as Peter because that is how he identifies himself.

The greeting is also simple: "may peace and grace to you be multiplied."

Peter is more elaborate in describing the Christian recipients of the letter. They are the elect resident aliens of the Diaspora.

Elect could also be translated as chosen. They are elected or chosen by God. Election is the initiative of God. Election is a corporate act. 1 Peter always speaks of elect people, not elect individuals. Election is for service not for privilege, just as it was for ancient Israel.

This election by God is qualified by three prepositional phrases.

First, it is election by the foreknowledge of God, which means that it is according to God's plan.

Second, it is election by the sanctification of the spirit. To sanctify is to make holy or to set apart for God. To be called holy is to be set apart for a special purpose in God's plan. It does not mean that they are more pious or moral than other people. They have been sanctified by the spirit, not as a charismatic gift but by the spirit as working through the Christian preaching that converted them.

Paul in his letters referred to the sanctified as saints. It is regrettable that the term has come to be reserved for those people whose lives approach moral perfection. It was originally intended to refer to ordinary people in the church who trust in God and try to reflect that trust in their attitude and actions.

Third, election is for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. The chosen people of God are obedient to Jesus Christ. Obedience and sprinkling of blood are language used in covenants. It is probably an allusion to Exodus 24, in which Moses comes down from Sinai after writing down all the ordinances that he received from the Lord. The people pledge their obedience to God's laws. Moses seals the covenant by sprinkling blood from animal sacrifices on the altar and on the people.

The Christian recipients of the letter are resident aliens, which a translation of the Greek noun, *παρεπίδημος*. The root meaning of the word in Greek is people who walk around. It can also be translated as sojourners or exiles. They are resident aliens of the Diaspora; the Diaspora refers to the people of Israel after the destruction of the Temple. They were scattered throughout the empire, with no homeland of their own. They are not resident aliens because of citizenship in heaven or because of marginal status. They are resident aliens because they are in historical continuity with the mission and destiny of Israel.

The letter is addressed to five regions in Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. These areas lie in the northern half of Asia Minor, what is present-day Turkey. Galatia is the only one of these areas that Paul evangelized. It is a similar audience to Revelation, which was addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor.

The purpose of this salutation is to remind the recipients of who they really are: resident aliens, who are out of place with the culture around them, who were chosen by God to be part of the continuing story of God's mission for Israel.

## **Second Move: A Thanksgiving for God's Initiative**

The second part of the letter is a thanksgiving. Verses 3 through 12 are one long sentence in Greek. That was considered an elegant way of writing. It is broken into several sentences in most English translations, where short sentences are regarded as the easiest to understand. Peter, like Paul, uses a long thanksgiving to give a summary of the contents of the letter.

This thanksgiving uses language of worship and praise to God. It begins, "Blessed be the god and father of our Lord Jesus Christ." We think of blessings as something that God does for us: "God, bless this food." This is a Jewish blessing; it is directed toward God and praises God for the gifts the people have received.

God is praised for giving a new existence to the Christian believers. God has begotten them anew or caused them to be born again. Begetting anew and being born again are good metaphors; none of us chooses to be born. Rebirth, like election, is the result of God's initiative. Our Christian identity is the result of God's action, not ours.

God has chosen the recipients to be born into God's story. They live in the period between God's mighty acts in the past and the imminent fulfillment of God's plan for the world.

The first past act that Peter refers to is the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. This act gives the Christians a living hope. In biblical theology, hope is the not-yet reality that shapes the way we live in the present. Fred Craddock says that this hope "is the very stuff of life; it keeps the farmer on the tractor, the prisoner alive, the student at the books and the patient watching for the morning."

God's action in the present is to preserve the inheritance and to empower the Christian to endure. The Christian does not go up at death to receive the inheritance but goes forward in history to meet it at the eschaton. It is not an inheritance that each individual Christian receives at his or her death. It is a restoration of the community of the righteous and the overcoming of evil. This is the inheritance that was promised to Israel in the Hebrew Bible. Jews in the first century had come to interpret this inheritance eschatologically. The original promise of a land of milk and honey had evolved into the promise of a restored kingdom.

Christian life in the present is marked by suffering. The suffering is not the mass of everyday problems that afflict people but the suffering and abuse inflicted on the Christian recipients because of their faith. Living the gospel stirs up anger, skepticism and taunting. This suffering most likely would come from family and neighbors rather than from official Roman persecution. We have no record of Roman persecution in Asia Minor in the late first century.

We think of our culture as looking with approval on our confessions of faith. Being a Christian is a sign of conformity for us. Being committed to a radical gospel is not. Fred Craddock says that it takes but one trip to the microphone at a public gathering, espousing the gospel, to face some of the skepticism and ridicule that the recipients of the letter received.

Peter tells the Christians that they will feel joy in their suffering. Suffering in and of itself is not redemptive. It has to be interpreted. We are creatures that long for meaning. Peter tells the Christian that their suffering is a sign of election and unity with Christ. The suffering melts away other less-worthy human hopes and desires and separates it from their faith. Faith is revealed as authentic because it has been tested by fire. To suffer righteously, not out of wickedness or randomness, is an opportunity to be made stronger.

Peter commends the Christians for loving and trusting Christ without having seen him. This is a similar theme to the gospel reading on today's lectionary: doubting Thomas.

They will feel joy because they have attained the goal of their faith, the salvation of their souls. Salvation has two dimensions: a salvation ready to be revealed in the end time (v. 5) and a salvation of your souls that you are now obtaining (v. 9). Souls here mean the whole person, not the Greek idea of separation of body from soul.

Peter gives the Christians a larger perspective by helping them see that they have a privileged place in God's story or plan. Their place is the envy of biblical prophets and angels. Old Testament prophets saw events in the near future that applied to the people of their own day. Apocalyptic prophets made prophecies about the end of history.

God is the most frequent noun in 1 Peter, appearing 39 times in 105 verses. God is not defined metaphysically or experientially but in history. Peter talks about God's mighty acts with the Christ event in the center of history. The basis for Christian life and ethics is not laws and principles but the story of God's mighty acts in history centered in the Christ event.

### **Third Move: A Story That Brings Salvation**

If we take our faith seriously, we feel like resident aliens in a strange land. Two books come to this conclusion from opposite poles of the religious and political spectrum. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, two Methodist scholars, wrote a book in 1989 called *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. They believe that contemporary culture is resistant to anyone who takes the Sermon on the Mount seriously and that liberal and conservative Christians get their values from politics instead of from their faith. Rod Dreher, who is about 25 years younger than Hauerwas and Willimon, just last month released a best-selling book called *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Dreher is a senior editor for a magazine called *The American Conservative*. Dreher believes that the culture has thoroughly succumbed to liberal secular values. The Supreme Court decision on gay marriage sent him over the edge. He believes that Christian communities should embrace the Rule of Benedict, which was written in the fifth century and is part of the mystical tradition of Christian spirituality that we have been discussing on Wednesday nights.

Hauerwas, Willimon and Dreher agree that the individualistic modern culture is anathema to Christian life. Hauerwas says it this way:

America is the exemplification of what I call the project of modernity.  
That project is the attempt to produce a people who believe that they

should have no story except the story that they choose when they had no story. That is what Americans mean by “freedom.”

People in the West have been challenging authority for the last 300 years, beginning with the Enlightenment. Actually, you could extend that back 500 years, when Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church by posting his Ninety-Five Theses on the castle church at Wittenburg.

People today are losing faith in institutions and traditions. We don’t trust the government, political parties, the news media, or universities. People don’t even trust facts; they think they are free to choose what facts to rely on.

Secular culture is filled with fatalism and despair. People don’t see any underlying meaning to their lives. Hauerwas says their lives are not part of a larger story. They see their lives as “one damn thing after another.”

Today’s text is a profound rejection of that point of view. Christians do have a story. It is not a story they created. God graciously reaches out to Christians and makes them part of God’s story.

I’m not sure how many Christians take their faith seriously. It is not a central part of their identity. In mega-churches today, there are too many tourists and not enough disciples. People are looking for churches with programs that will suit them: children’s programs, programs on managing your household finances, singles groups, road trips for golden-agers. If you are looking for programs, I don’t think our congregation will satisfy your needs for personal fulfillment. We will be a one-room schoolhouse for the foreseeable future. Our program is to build disciples.

Suffering doesn’t make sense to secular culture. Peter encourages Christians to take joy in suffering, when suffering comes from living faithfully. When I meet with families to plan funerals, one question I always ask is, what were their struggles? I want to know how dealing with their struggles made them stronger. I want to help their families and the congregation understand that their story is part of the Christian story.

We long to part of something bigger than us. Seeking our self interest won’t get us there. Satisfying our desires only gives momentary gratification before new desires assert themselves.

When we see ourselves as part of God’s story, we stand with the saints who came before us, the saints who are with us now, and the saints who will come after us in the future. The saints reject their own desires and follow Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

When we are baptized, we jump into a river that carries us along. God's story was started before us and it will continue when we are gone. We don't need to search for meaning; we are surrounded by meaning.

We will sound like resident aliens when we talk to people on the outside about what life in a Christian community is like. Where people practice non-violence. Reject competition. Express their vulnerability. Visit the prisoners. Listen to strangers. Take joy in suffering.

Blessed be God, who in his great mercy, made us part of his story.

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