

SERMON TITLE: “Living Into the Light”

TEXT: I Peter 2:9-12

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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We continue to make our way through our MB Confession of Faith.

We’re 6 weeks into our series and there are five to go, so I thought it might be nice to kind of take a step back and have a look back at where we’ve been and where we are going from now until Advent.

In very general terms, the previous five weeks have been about what *God* has done:

1. The Big Picture: God’s Redemption Story
2. God the Father
 - The Creator, the one who calls a people into existence, who covenants with them, promising blessing and guidance
3. God the Son
 - God as seen most uniquely (and accurately) in Jesus Christ
 - God who dies for his enemies
 - Our Redeemer who takes our place, who shows us how to live, who bears our sins on the cross, who rises from the dead opening the door to new life
4. God the Holy Spirit
 - God who does not leave us as orphans in the world
 - God who fills us as followers of Jesus and who continues to guide and direct his people

So this is what we’ve done thus far. The four weeks prior to Advent have to do with *our* response to what God has done. We’re going to be talking about a number of things that our COF says about how we are to respond to who God is and what God has done:

1. People of the Book
 - a. People oriented by Scripture
2. Reconciliation/Peacemaking
 - a. modeling and working for peace at a number of levels
3. New Way of Life
 - a. Discipleship, following Jesus’ commands in all of life
4. Mission and Hope
 - a. Announcing the kingdom in word and deed, spreading the hope of the gospel

All of that is still to come. So up until now it’s been (very appropriately) all about God and in the weeks to come it’s going to be about our response to God.

Today, we're in between these two sections, we have today which is kind of a bridge between the two: the church.

I think that the church can work as a bridge between these two parts of our COF series because it is both something that God does *and* something that we do, as I hope to explain this morning.

IF I WAS GOD...

Every once in a while, I like to ask myself impossible hypothetical questions. Sometimes, I ask myself "If I were God" questions. If I were God, how would I do x, y, z?

And so, if I were God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and I had made a world full of wonder and beauty, and human image-bearers to steward what I had made, who had abused their freedom and horribly messed up my creation... and if I had decided upon a rescue plan that involved my coming to earth to walk among them to teach and to heal, to show them how to live, and to ultimately take their sin and shame upon myself on the cross as the means by which to begin to bring heaven and earth together again...

What would come next in the story? What would I do if I were God?

1. Maybe I would make a new and improved kind of Ten Commandments. The first version was pretty good, but people weren't really very good at keeping them. Maybe a new set would work, with a few important additions, say, from the Sermon on the Mount or something like that? Kind of like a Ten Commandments 2.0.
2. Maybe I would just write a formal-looking memo that laid things out in a very clear way so that there would be no confusion or ambiguity:

Dear humanity,

Here is what has happened. Here is where and how things have gone wrong. Here is what God has done. Here is what you need to do. You have this amount of time to respond appropriately. I await your response.

Sincerely,
God.

3. Or maybe I would just force people to see the truth of who I am and what I had done. No more subtlety or gentle persuasion. Maybe something like a Holy Spirit force field or overpowering spiritual energy that would render people incapable of resisting me any longer—something that would force them to see their errors and to embrace the many ways that I had acted on their behalf.

4. Or, better yet, if I was Jesus, I would just write a book myself! Just last week I received a book on my desk to review that is actually called *The Gospel According to Jesus*. Wouldn't that be a fantastic idea! A book by Jesus! I would write down everything I had said and done and why I had said and done it, and there would be no room for misinterpretation or confusion. I wouldn't rely on others to write down my messages because other people are, well, unreliable and they muck up the important bits of the message with all kinds of incidental elements from their cultural and historical and linguistic context that tend to confuse people who aren't familiar with them.

But Jesus didn't write a book. God didn't do any of the things I just mentioned.

Rather, Jesus formed a community.

Apparently, Jesus figured that a community would be a better strategy than a book.

But what kind of community?

ICOMB COF

Here's what our ICOMB Confession of Faith has to say:

The church is God's new creation, agent of transformation, called to model God's design for humanity. The people of God call everyone to repentance and conversion, seek to promote righteousness, are faithful in suffering, share generously with those in need. They act as agents of reconciliation to reverse the alienation brought on by sin. In the Lord's Supper the church proclaims the Lord's death and celebrates the new covenant.

The new creation will be completed when Christ returns. All who belong to Christ will rise with a new body while Satan and those who have rejected Christ will face eternal condemnation. The new heaven and new earth will live under God's rule in everlasting peace and joy.

That sounds pretty amazing, doesn't it?

- God's new creation
- Agents of transformation
- Models for God's design for humanity
- Calling people to repentance, conversion, righteousness
- Faithful in suffering
- Sharing generously
- Agents of reconciliation
- Reversing alienation of sin

Wow! That's a pretty impressive confession of what the church is! But a Confession is just words, right?

One of the things that has struck me throughout our current sermon series exploring our MB Confession of Faith (and the two mid-week discussions I have been involved in through care group and young adults) is that there are two very important parts of the what we are trying to do:

1. Explain what we confess as an MB church
2. Answer the “so what?” question.

In other words, it’s not enough to just understand what we believe about x, y, or z and why we believe it. The more important question is: how does what we confess find expression in our daily lives? This is the question that matters, whether on an individual level or for us as a faith community.

We do not just confess with our mouths, but with our lives.

I may have used this quote before, but one of my good friends from Regent College often said this: “Don’t tell me what you believe. I’ll watch what you do, and then I’ll tell you what you believe!”

So, what *do* we do? We’ve seen what our confession states about what the church is. Does this describe the church we see?

WHAT GOOD IS THE CHURCH?

I have a file full of quotes and resources from those who are somehow disaffected with the church. Here’s one I came across this week from Kathleen Norris:

From the outside, church congregations can look like remarkably contentious places, full of hypocrites who talk about love while fighting each other tooth and nail. That is reason many people give for avoiding them.

Yesterday a number of folks from this church were down at the Vancouver Island Conference Centre for a series of lectures by John Stackhouse about reason, faith, and the new atheists.

This is a common theme in these books: how could anyone take Christianity seriously when the church has been responsible for so much violence and hatred and indoctrination over they year?!

For these authors, the church is the *problem*, not the *solution*!

Most people wouldn’t put it quite that strongly, but I suspect that statements like these aren’t much of a surprise to you. I suspect that you’ve heard similar sentiments from friends, neighbours, family, co-workers, etc.

I know I've heard many of them. Almost everyone has some kind of a horror story about their last church or the church of their childhood or their parents' church or even their *current* church.

Sometimes these critiques are justified, sometimes they're not.

But all of us are familiar with expressions of church that seem *light years* from the confession that we just read (remember all of those wonderful statements?).

I like how Frederick Buechner puts it:

Our stories are at best a parody of his story, and if, as Paul says, we are the fragrance of Christ, then it is like the fragrance of the sea from ten miles inland when the wind is blowing in the right direction, like the fragrance of a rose from the other side of the street with all the world in between.

So what gives? How come the church on the ground seems so often not to resemble the church we confess?

I PETER

This brings us to our text this morning, from I Peter 2:9-10:

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

As I read this passage throughout the week it occurred to me that some similar things are going on in these two verses as we saw earlier in our MB COF. The people and the situation Peter is describing sounds almost too good to be true!

- Chosen people
- Royal priesthood
- Holy nation
- God's special possession
- Called out of darkness into wonderful light
- The people of God

But just like the churches that you and I are familiar with—and the church we are a part of—the church Peter was writing to wasn't perfect. And it didn't *seem* to match the description Peter was giving them.

The church Peter was writing to was a small group of mostly non-Jewish converts to Christianity who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They were people familiar with persecution and mistreatment. They were struggling to figure out what it

meant to live in the power of the Holy Spirit, following Jesus as Lord in a world where other “lords” seemed much more obvious and powerful.

And they were still learning. I Peter was probably written about three decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

They were babies (that’s actually how Peter describes them earlier in chapter 2). They were still figuring out what it meant to say and live out the truth that a crucified Jewish carpenter was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

I’m sure that if some Roman official had heard Peter’s list as a description of the church he would have laughed out loud! Chosen? Holy? *Royal!*! God’s “special possession? What a joke! They’re just a tiny little marginalized Jewish cult struggling for survival!

In both cases—the church Peter is writing to and the church of today—there is a gap between what we understand the church to be and what the church looks like at any given moment.

NOW AND NOT YET

What we need to see, both in our COF and in our passage this morning, is that there are two realities at that are always at work, defining and guiding and shaping our stories as individuals and as churches..

Now and not yet.

The first reality is the reality of churches where sinful human beings come together and have different opinions, where people hurt one another, where there are conflicts and confusion.

Rather than being places of healing, forgiveness and hope, churches can be places of judgment, confusion, exclusion, and even pain.

There are plenty of good things involved in the reality of church life on the ground as well—we’ve seen some already this morning with Samaritan’s purse, etc.

But the big picture is of a church that still falls short of the ideal.

There is another reality at work, though, and this is the reality of what God intends, what God sees in us, and what God is doing to bring this about.

It is a reality that we don’t see in its entirety yet, but it’s a reality that is guaranteed because of what Jesus has accomplished on our behalf.

This is the reality that our COF attempts to describe. This is the reality that I Peter 2:9-10 describes.

LIVING INTO THE LIGHT

So how do we live as the church in this now/not yet time? How do we live out our confession that describes what we are and what we should be?

Well, we do many of the things that the church has, at its best, always done.

We Make Disciples

- Call people to repent, be baptized, and teach them to obey Jesus

We Welcome

- All people to be a part of us—male and female, from every nation, race and class.

We Worship

- We sing, we pray, we learn, we give, we offer our lives to God in community with one another.

We Seek Fellowship and Accountability

- We love and care for one another, we share each other's joys and burdens, and admonish and correct one another.
- We learn from and offer our support to other churches in our conference and in the broader Christian community. We work together in a spirit of love, mutual submission, and interdependence.

We Use Our Gifts for Ministry

- Each of us plays a different role, but each gift is given for the well-being of the whole body.

In short, we love God and we love our neighbours.

Again, sounds pretty good doesn't it?

And you know what the really great thing is? It's already happening! It's not happening perfectly or as consistently as we might like, of course, but we are being the church right now!

- We see it when we take the time and effort to make pies for the jail on Thanksgiving
- We see it when people from among us volunteer to serve at the Crisis Pregnancy Centre or when take time to support other churches and serve at the community lunch put on by the Presbyterian Church on Thursdays

- We see it when women get together to fellowship and make crafts for people in need on Monday nights
- We see it when we gather material resources for families in need for our community or when we give generously to support organizations that provide relief and share the gospel around the world.
- We see it when people stick around after church on the first Sunday of each month to share food and share their lives with one another
- We see it when people devote \$40 and a whole Saturday to go hear a lecture, to love God with their minds and to love their neighbours by learning more about how to understand people who disagree with us in order to more effectively communicate the gospel in our culture
- We see it when people devote 1-2 nights a week to spend time with our youth, to walk with them through their teenage years and be good friends and role models
- We see it with little acts of kindness that are offered to encourage and strengthen those we care about

We see it in these things, and hundreds of others that I haven't mentioned. That's just some of the stuff I've noticed around here and among us over the last few weeks.

Each of these are examples of what Peter is talking about—living as those who have been called out of darkness and into God's marvelous light.

The church is not perfect. *Our* church is not perfect.

It takes a while for our eyes to get used to light when we are used to darkness.

But just like the church in Peter's day, we are, *right now*, being the church. We are, right now, living out our confession of faith. We are pointing to the kingdom of God that is both now and not yet.

The church is *God's* idea. And the church is a *good* idea.

I want to close with words from I Corinthians 1:27-28:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

For some, the church might seem like a foolish, weak institution that has never and can never live up to its ideals.

And they would be right.

And they would be wrong:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

May we as a church continue to live *into* the light. May we continue to allow God's strength to be shown in our weakness.

Amen.



Benediction from I Peter 1:3-5:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.