

YOU HAVE BEEN BORN AGAIN

1 PETER 1:13-23

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Over the stretch between now and Pentecost, we're going to drop down in the book of 1 Peter.

I will be looking at this little letter, written in the first century (not long after Jesus' death and resurrection), as something like a post-Easter guidebook.

What does it look like to live as followers of Jesus in the aftermath of Easter? How is the new life of resurrection supposed to make its way out into the world, in the various contexts and circumstances and trials and challenges that Jesus' followers would find themselves in?

I want to start by stating an obvious fact, but one that is perhaps worth making explicit:

Christian discipleship always takes place in a particular context. And these contexts are not the same.

There are different challenges and opportunities to being a Christian in, for example twentieth century China than in medieval Europe. There are different challenges and opportunities right now in being a Christian in relatively wealthy suburban North America or Western Europe than in, say, Sudan. Or Iran. Or the Philippines.

Being a Christian looks and feels different if you are a white, middle class, and of Western European extraction than if you are black or brown or poor or part of any group that has not enjoyed social locations of privilege and opportunity.

This doesn't mean that we're not all called to be conformed to the image of Christ. It doesn't mean that we're not all called to repent and follow and trust in the finished work of God at Easter.

All Christians are "strangers in a strange land" by virtue of our allegiance to Christ and his kingdom.

But lands are strange in different ways, and the experience of being a stranger *feels* different at different times and places.

I was thinking about these things as I read 1 Peter 1:17 this week:

Live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.

Let's get the "fear" part out of the way first. The word does not mean anything like "terror" or "dread" but a basic acknowledgment that God is God and we are not.

But I want to focus more on the second part of this statement: "During the time of your exile." That's an interesting word: "exile."

On the surface, I think gets at the experience of being "far from home" or "not belonging."

How many of you were born in southern Alberta? How many of you have come from somewhere else? How many of you have spent significant time living somewhere other than the place you think of as "home?"

I have only had the experience of living a province over, and I've *certainly* never been forced to go anywhere against my will, but I recall when we first moved to Vancouver the feeling that things were strange, unknown, disorienting, that I didn't really belong. Maybe you know the feeling.

In Scripture, the word "exile" immediately brings to mind the great OT themes of exile and return and characters like Abraham and Joseph and Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jeremiah. The theme of exile runs throughout the OT.

The NT also uses the language of exile to describe the status and experience of followers of Jesus. They are described as, among other things, strangers and pilgrims—exiles in the land.

For the recipients 1 Peter, their exile was experienced in a particular way. They were among the first followers of Jesus in a context where this was brand new and suspicious.

Christianity was a despised foreign religion in the Roman society.

In this context, their exile was one of suffering the ridicule and revulsion of their neighbours, the suspicion of their fellow citizens. At times, it included the severing of familiar bonds and ties to the histories of their communities.

They found themselves on the outside of ancient customs and practices that had ordered their lives for a long time.

Peter gestures toward this when he tells them to “not be conformed to the desires you *formerly had in ignorance.*”

You were ransomed from the “futile ways of your ancestors,” he says, “with the precious blood of Christ.”

Peter’s word to the first century exiles scattered throughout Asia Minor: Persevere in suffering. Remember who you are and the price that was paid for your salvation. Set your hope on the grace of Jesus Christ.

So, that’s the context of the exiles Peter is writing to in the first century.

What about us, all these years later. What is the context of our exile as Christians in this time and this place?

On Friday, I listened to a fascinating dialogue with Jonathan Sacks, who holds the title of “Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth,” (which sounds considerably cooler than “pastor,” but I digress... 😊) and Charles Taylor, the Canadian Roman Catholic philosopher who has written quite possibly the most comprehensive analysis of our present religious/cultural moment in his book, *The Secular Age* (it’s about a million pages of 10 point font—it sits impressively neglected on my bookshelf, if you’d like to have a look).

They were speaking at a symposium that took place at the University of Toronto where the topic was “The Future of Religion.”

Rabbi Sacks points to a paradox of our time. He begins with a diagnosis:

Look at where we are right now in the evolution of human civilization. To explain the world, we don't need revelation, we have science; to control it, we don't need oracles and magic, we have technology; to control power, we don't need the prophets, we have elections; if we're ill we don't go to a priest, but to a doctor; if we're depressed, we don't need the book of Psalms, we can take a pill; and if we are in search of salvation, we can go to the modern cathedrals of the modern age, namely shopping centers. So, in functional terms, everything religion used to do is now done by something else. And yet still people believe.”

Or at least they say they do, even if many have little interest in church or formal religion. Why?

According to Sacks, it's “because the four great institutions of the modern age: science, technology, liberal democratic politics, and the market economy cannot answer the three fundamental questions that every reflective human being will ask”:

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I here?
3. How then shall I live?

Human beings are meaning seeking animals!

I agree with Sacks. This is our twenty-first century cultural moment. These are the conditions of our “exile,” as believers.

We have largely left religion behind, prioritizing science and technology and politics and pleasure, but we still have these fleeing moments where we realize that these things are not enough.

Politicians let us down. Technology, rather than delivering us, enslaves us. Buying one more thing doesn't satisfy. All the pills in the world might make us feel better in the moment, but they don't give us meaning. And, of course, we still die.

And so on the one hand, we're happy to leave religion behind. But on the other hand, we hunger for something more, even if we can't define it.

The conditions of our exile are not characterized by suffering or persecution, for the most part. It is mostly ideological laziness, sloppy thinking, individualism, consumerism, and a vague sense that the things that we value most—love, justice, beauty, truth—just kind of exist in a free floating way.

There was a moment yesterday where this was driven home to me with blinding clarity. I was listening to a podcast with a respected academic. The interview began with the host of the program asking her to say a bit about the spiritual or religious background of her childhood, if there was anything to speak of.

The guest responded by saying that she was an atheist. This wasn't the interesting part. The interesting part was when she talked about *why* she was an atheist.

She said that she was on a website where apparently you can "look through" the Hubble telescope. I didn't have time to look myself, but I assume such a thing is possible.

At any rate, she was blown away by the scope and immensity and beauty and grandeur of space. I think many of us would report similar experiences.

But then she said something that struck me as just about the perfect synopsis of our cultural moment:

I mean, I don't know if you've ever looked at the Hubble Telescope site on the internet, but when you take a look at what's out there, it's so staggering. Reality is so staggering. The real meanings of life for me are in reality, I guess.¹

Her response to an experience of awe is to say, "the real meanings of life for me are in reality" (i.e. *not* in religion).

It seemed not to occur to her to ask questions like, "Why would I respond in such a way to an experience of wonder? Why do human beings seem wired to be drawn to beauty?"

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/helen-fisher-this-is-your-brain-on-sex/>

Or, more significantly yet, “Why does this staggering cosmos exist? Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Instead, she says “the real meanings of life for me are in reality.”

And my thought was, “How could such an obviously intelligent person have such an utterly unreflective response to the world and themselves within it? How could they operate with such simplistic categories (reality *or* religion)? How could they apparently not bother to wonder whether or not religion might be, in part, a *response* to wonder or among the deepest reflections *upon* reality?”

I have to say, I couldn’t even listen any longer. I turned the program off with a not very admirable amount of disgust.

But this is where we live. I hear comments like this quite regularly. Many people kind of skate across the surface of things, picking and choosing meaning where they can find it, ignoring the harder demands of religious traditions of discipline and reflection and even suffering, and not really bothering to inquire about whether their approach to life and God and meaning and truth are consistent or coherent in any way.

This, it seems to me, is what exile looks like for followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century.

There is one final thing I want to say about the conditions of our exile, as twenty-first century Christians.

Our exile takes place in which most people in our culture have decided that truth is best discovered by looking *in* not up.

We regularly hear the expression: True for me. Those two words at the end—“for me”—say a great deal.

There was a time when people aspired to something like “holiness” or “virtue.” Our passage today is all about holiness.

Now, our highest ambition seems to be authenticity.

Again, this is obviously true outside the church, but I think it creeps into the church as well.

Perhaps you had a negative reaction when you heard the word, “holiness.” Maybe it conjured up an oppressively religious upbringing involving a long list of do’s and don’t’s.

I Googled the word “holiness” this week and underneath the definition of the word there was a graph showing frequency of the word’s usage from roughly 1800 to the present. I have no idea how Google measures such things, but I wasn’t surprised by the result. The graph was high in the 1800’s and exhibited a sharp and steady decline right down to the present.

We don’t use the word much any more. Maybe we don’t like it. Maybe we think it sounds antiquated or. Maybe it crosses the most loathsome of twenty-first century thresholds, and is “judgmental.”

We do not aspire to be true to some objective standard but to ourselves.

And yet Peter gives the first century exiles this charge: be holy as God is holy.

Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance (v. 14).

Set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming (v. 13).

Love one another deeply, from the heart (v. 22).

Later, he will make it even clearer:

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. **Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**

Or, as Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount:

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Whether “exile” looks like a tiny first century church making its way out of the shadows of the Jewish worldview that birthed it or the paganism of the Gentile world, or our present day situation of a secularized church living in post-Christian age of confused individualism, the task is the same.

Be holy as I am holy. Live lives of purity, in every domain. Be people of grace and truth. And, most importantly, “love one another deeply from the heart.” This, Peter says, is what it looks like to be obedient to the truth.

There is an absolutely unbreakable connection between truth and love in the Christian life.

When truth is ignored, love becomes self-serving and small. When truth is embraced, love is purified and comes to resemble the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Our text today began with an important word: Therefore.

As one of my professors back in graduate school used to say, “Whenever you see the word “therefore” in Scripture, you should always ask, “what is the ‘therefore’ there for?”

In this case, the “therefore” is tied to 1:3-4:

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, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

This is the foundation, the motivation, the reason for all of our pursuit to live lives of holiness and truth in our time of exile, whatever our exile looks like.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Easter.

We, too, have been ransomed from the “futile ways of life” of our time by the blood of Jesus, and set free to live lives that demonstrate to a watching world what it means to

be human. It might sound arrogant. It might sound like more than we could ever aspire to. But I am convinced that it is true.

We have been born again, as Peter says in verse 23, “through the living and enduring word of God.”

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

The experience of exile differs; but the response is always the same: to bring the light and the life and the example and the love of Christ to all people and all places.

May God help us, with minds that are alert and fully sober, to set our hope on the grace to be brought to us when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

Amen.

