

Exiles: Finding Hope While Scattered

A Series on the Book of First Peter

Message 7 – “Finding Hope” (1 Peter 5:1-14)
St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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Psalm 137

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
² There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴ How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
⁵ If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.
⁷ Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
“Tear it down,” they cried,
“tear it down to its foundations!”
⁸ Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
⁹ Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.*

Sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it. These are the words of Psalm 137. They reflect the strong emotions felt by the people of Israel when they were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar when he ransacked Jerusalem and exiled them to Babylon around the year 586 B.C. There in Babylon they remained for 70 years. For 70 years, they lived as foreigners in an alien land. They were forced to live without their former comforts, forced to live without their freedoms, forced to eat foods that were not what they were used to, even forced to take on new names, new jobs, and new homes. For 70 years. Many of them grew up in exile. Many of them died in exile.

70 years.

So, I have a question for you... How have you been doing with this quarantine stuff?

It's quite normal for us to go through the gamut of emotions. When the COVID-19 virus came our way, many of us got scared. Some of us still are. Then we became concerned. Then many of us were overcome with compassion for others – and we helped to provide groceries and supplies. Then the longer the quarantine lasted, we became more and more anxious. And as we moved from the acute phase to a more chronic phase, some of us became bored with the walls – and the relationships – of our homes. And then we started to get angry.

We've been in our exile for two months.

For us, it does seem that we are going to get through this pandemic. It may take some more time, but we're going to get through it. There are smart people working on vaccines. And good medical people who are helping our loved ones heal. And there are good counselors who are helping us navigate through the emotions.

And God is at work in and through it all.

Exile certainly has a way of bringing out the good, the bad and the ugly in all of us.

I wonder... What are we learning about *ourselves* during our exile?

And more importantly, ***how will we be different*** for having lived through it?

Throughout his letter, we have been hearing Peter tell his readers to **remember who they are, why they're here, and where they're going**. He's told us that **our witness for Jesus is more important than anything else** --- whether that witness is in how we respond to those in authority over us, or to those who treat us unfairly or with evil intent, or to those who share the same table with us. He's told us that love and humility and hospitality are the character traits in us that tell others who Jesus is.

As Peter closes out his letter, he wants those in the churches to whom he's writing to realize that God is calling them to a very important purpose and that they need to remain focused on what's really important.

So, he starts by addressing those who are leaders in the Church. Now, most likely, back then the "church" really referred to "house churches" – gatherings of several families of believers that would get together in each other's homes for worship, for prayer, for fellowship, and for sharing meals and communion together. The leaders of those churches were often heads of houses, or people who were most senior in age or wisdom that others naturally deferred to.

To them, Peter writes ...

To the **elders** among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²Be **shepherds of God's flock** that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (**1 Peter 5:1-4**).

Peter is telling us that what defines a discipleship-focused movement is, first of all, its leader's ability to give people Christ-centered hope. Notice that Peter uses the phrase, "I appeal." The Greek word he uses borders on "begging." In other words, he's pleading with the leaders to make his point.

What's his point? This is what I think Peter's saying to them – and to us: "Look, things are going to get worse. And as things get worse, it's going to threaten to pull us into those dark places of greed and selfishness and abuse of power. But no matter how bad things get... **remember that you and I – we were designed for times like this. Therefore, we need to rise to the opportunity to lead in a way that others want to follow.**"

Peter reminds us that **God has a plan that's bigger than us**. And we get to be part of that massive movement of what God is doing in the world. I believe that God asks greater things of His followers. I believe God asks us to live within a framework that sacrifices our own wants, needs, entitlements, and even failures and successes for the sake of His redemptive plan and purpose for humanity. I believe He asks us to lead against the currents of social structure and to uphold a value system that doesn't necessarily make logical sense in our culture's normal way of operating. As I've stated earlier this year, I believe God asks us to walk as Jesus walked, love as Jesus loved, value what Jesus valued, forgive when it doesn't make sense to do so, offer grace to those who don't deserve it, and by such actions, to invite people into a life worth dying for.

In verse 5, Peter writes...

⁵In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders... (**1 Peter 5:5**).

In Mark 8:34-35, we read that Jesus gathers His followers—both the crowd and the Twelve—and lays out for them what true discipleship is all about: "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*" What exactly did Jesus mean when He said, "deny themselves," and "take up their cross"? All the followers of Jesus needed to do was watch him.

In fact, a few verses earlier in Mark 8:31, Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, to which Jesus then responds by telling the Twelve that he "*must undergo*

great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

In verse 32, we read that Jesus "spoke plainly" about his upcoming suffering, death and resurrection, but Peter "took him aside and began to rebuke him." Then in an amazing moment within the account, Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, and he rebuked Peter: "*Get behind me, Satan!*" he said; "*for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*" (v. 33).

In order for Peter to take over leadership of the divine movement, he must first surrender his right to shape its direction and its consequences. Otherwise, he will convert the movement to a resistance or rebellion against Rome, or against the Jewish leaders, just as Judas would eventually try to do as well: "*For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*" (v. 33). God was clearly doing something much bigger than Peter was allowing.

Leadership is hard. How do we do it? How do we navigate through our seasons of exile and pandemic without missing what God is trying to do?

This weekend, we celebrate Pentecost – that moment over two thousand years ago when the Holy Spirit came upon those early believers and the movement of God's mission known as the Church was born. What we are reminded of each and every Pentecost is that **God Himself equips ordinary people – you and me – to do extraordinary, God-sized things**. God pours into us His Holy Spirit so that we might have the power to carry out the tasks of God's great mission in the world. So, for many of us, the challenge that we face is the challenge of getting out of our own way so that God can use us.

In Peter's letter, he continues...

...All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble..."

Peter knows first-hand what it means. He experienced that humility first-hand.

And he also experienced it again, when he denied knowing Jesus three times on the night that Jesus was betrayed and arrested. Later, after Jesus's resurrection, Jesus would restore Peter – lifting him up to become the leader of this massive movement that would be called the Church.

From experience, Peter writes in verse 6 ---

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time (1 Peter 5:6).

Peter also understands that it's hard for us to navigate through the persecution, oppression and opposition – for each involves pain, loss, suffering and grief. The people to whom he was writing may or may not have been known to him personally, but he cared for them. And he called upon the elders (leaders) and those younger (followers) to...

⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

You see, the God who calls us to stand in the storm of persecution, to stand in the waves of oppression and opposition, is the God who compassionately will care for us through it.

But those are not the only battles that Christians will be called on to fight. In verse 8, Peter writes...

⁸Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

There is a reality that we may not be aware of – a spiritual battle that is ongoing where the Enemy of Love tries to pull us away from all that God has birthed in us. Remember, for everything that God is birthing in us, there will be an equal and opposite reaction to it. But Peter reminds us in verse 9 to...

⁹Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings (1 Peter 5:9).

In other words...You're not alone. We are better together. Pentecost reminds us that we are stronger when we're united together. The feelings of isolation threaten to make us think that we stand alone, but we do not. Regardless of how exiled we may feel, we are still connected. Regardless of how alone we may feel, we are part of a family that's bigger than our fear. Regardless of how weak may think we are, we have a God who is strong enough and powerful enough to face any Goliath – and by His Holy Spirit, He gives us that power too. And regardless of how exhausted we may be – physically or emotionally or spiritually – God has issued a promise...

Peter spells that out next...

¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5:10).

I hear the words of the apostle Paul here in Romans 5, when he says...

"we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

It is this new "hope of sharing the glory of God" that redefines the future for the follower of Jesus. That hope beckons the believer forward through sufferings,

through challenges, through persecutions, through hardships, in a movement empowered and directed by God's Holy Spirit. That's Pentecost!

As followers of Jesus, as leaders for his movement, we are first and foremost to be **ambassadors of hope**. With that hope, we shepherd God's flock to greener pastures and places of justice and genuine reconciliation and peace; and we do so within the inspiration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its impending promise for all of those who are called by His name.

Hope in Jesus gets people moving. Christian pastor and author, Henri Nouwen, in his classic book, *The Wounded Healer*, writes, "Christian leaders are not leaders because they announce a new idea and try to convince others of its worth. They are leaders because they face the world with **eyes full of expectation**, and with **the expertise to take away the veil that covers its hidden potential**."ⁱ As ambassadors of hope, that's our job—to "take away the veil that covers [the] hidden potential" of those who join us on God's divine mission. It's our job to point people to both the Cross of Christ and to the Resurrection—and witness, by our actions, that we hold to the hope here-and-now of the life-yet-to-come.

Peter begins to close his letter in a very personal way. In verse 12, he writes...

*¹²With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. **Stand fast in it (1 Peter 5:12)**.*

Stand fast in it.

At the start of this message, I asked, "What are we learning about ourselves during our exile? And more importantly, "how will we be different for having gone through it?"

One thing I've learned...I don't want to go back to the way things were. Let's not go back to "normal." Instead let's go FORWARD to where God wants to take us next. How will we be different? What will we have learned?

Especially on Pentecost, we need to remember who we are, why we're here, and where we're going. We are followers of Jesus Christ. We are children of the Most High God. We were designed for times like this. Allow me to close this sermon series the way Peter closes his first letter:

Peace to all of you who are in Christ (1 Peter 5:14). Will you pray with me...

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1972), 80.