

# Exiles: Finding Hope While Scattered

A Series on the Book of First Peter

Message 1 – “Exiles”

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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He saw Jesus:

- heal lepers
- cure the lame
- give sight to the blind
- cast out demons with a single command
- confound religious scholars with a simple question
- multiply fish and bread to feed thousands – *twice!*
- raise a dead man – or two
- silence crowds of people with words of hope
- heal his mother-in-law
- stir up controversy in synagogues
- and cause both religious and Roman officials to get incredibly nervous

In spite of all of that, he denied knowing Jesus and fled in fear when Jesus needed him the most.

This was Peter – “the rock,” the man who was one of Jesus’s closest friends.

And in spite of all of his foibles, fears and failures, he was invited to encounter the risen Lord and to begin a movement that would forever change the world.

And some 30 years after that movement began, he would write one of the most powerfully encouraging letters to Christians. Christians who were facing some of the most difficult conditions and persecutions that the Church would ever experience across its history.

That letter is what we know as First Peter in our New Testament. And it’s a letter that speaks to us today out of the context of its own fears, pains and isolations – and into ours.

We really have no idea of the full range of persecutions and fears, loss and isolation that those early Christians faced back in the first century church. It was a time in the Roman Empire that revealed the total depravity of humanity. It was around the year 63 or 64 AD. Emperor Nero was in charge of the Roman Empire and what he did to Christians was atrocious. The waves of intense persecutions that he instigated caused many of those early believers to scatter – in an attempt to save their lives and the lives of their families. They scattered throughout the Roman Empire – moving to the northern parts of Asia Minor. They were believers in Jesus who now found themselves to be exiles.

My name is David Woolverton and I'm one of the pastors here at St. Paul's Church. As we dive into this incredible letter, we begin a new message series called, "Exiles: *Finding Hope While Scattered.*" For the next six weeks, we are going to allow the words of the apostle Peter to speak hope into our lives today; hope into our season of isolation and social distancing; and hope into our simmering fears and anxieties. We may be exiles within our own homes, but we are not a people who have no hope.

Peter's letter is first and foremost a letter of encouragement. He wants those early Christians – and he wants us – to realize that challenges are really opportunities to remember who we are, why we're here, and where we're going.

In Chapter 1 verses 1-2 we read:

*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, **exiles scattered** throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup> **who have been chosen** according to the **foreknowledge** of God the Father, through the **sanctifying work of the Spirit**, to be **obedient to Jesus Christ** and **sprinkled with his blood**: Grace and peace be yours **in abundance**.*

What powerful words of encouragement to those who are feeling disconnected and set apart. Peter is telling them that their identity in Christ is secure – and that their identity in Christ would give them the courage that they need to redefine challenges and oppositions as opportunities to represent Christ in the world as ambassadors of hope.

In his own way, Peter—who personally understands persecution, trial, loss, imprisonment, beatings, and scattering – reframes those trials.

In verses 6-7, he writes:

*<sup>6</sup> In all this you greatly rejoice, though now **for a little while** you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. <sup>7</sup> These have come **so that** the **proven** genuineness of your faith—of **greater worth** than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—**may result in** praise, glory and honor **when Jesus Christ is revealed**.*

By his words, he is encouraging those scattered believers to remain true to who they are, by remembering that God never wastes a hurt – that God will redeem all of their pain... and that we are all part of a bigger plan that God has been shaping since the beginning of time.

In verses 10-11, we read:

*<sup>10</sup> Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, <sup>11</sup> trying to find*

*out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.*

So, even though they are facing a time of great pain and persecution, Peter encourages them to keep their eyes on a greater hope, a bigger reality for those who are in Christ.

In verses 3-5, he writes:

*<sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> and into an **inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade**. This inheritance is **kept in heaven for you**, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are **shielded by God's power** until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

When's the last time you felt "shielded by God's power"? Peter's words are for you and me today!

Exiles.

We are exiled into our homes. Quarantined... with good purpose, but socially distanced from one another. Exiled into our anxieties and fears. Exiled by a pandemic.

But we have an opportunity to change our perspective.

What if – instead of feeling exiled by a pandemic, we choose to believe that we are...

Exiled by purposeful love --- love on behalf of protecting our neighbors... of giving ourselves to those who don't yet know personally the love that God has for them.

First Peter is a letter that reminds the church that FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE MOST POWERFUL WHEN THEY'RE GATHERED TOGETHER, BUT MOST EFFECTIVE IN THEIR WITNESS WHEN THEY'RE SCATTERED.

Gathered and Scattered.

Who we are is why we're here.

When – in the midst of our anxieties related to this pandemic – we are wondering where our hope is, we need to look in the mirror of God's Word and realize that you and I, as followers of Jesus, are the ambassadors of hope. By our life in Christ, by

how we love others the way Jesus loved them, we give testimony to hope in a scattered world.

We may be exiles, but as exiles we are called to live with purpose. I'm asking you to do two things:

1. Take this time of exile and make it an opportunity to embody love for someone else.
2. Adopt someone into your family – to decrease their isolation and yours. Share words of encouragement. Pray for them. Call them.