

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND A SERMON ON 1 Peter 1:1-12

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Tammy's mom and dad regularly took her cousins out for dinner. The youngest cousin, Tasha, who was five at the time, said when they picked her up that she wanted to go to Taco Bell. "Now Tasha, we can go anywhere you like. We can go to a very nice restaurant." "I want Taco Bell!" "Are you sure? We can go get seafood. Or even steak!" "My mom said you'd take me to Taco Bell!" she bellowed back.

Isn't that like us sometimes? We get so accustomed to what we're surrounded with that we forget that things could be so much better. We choose the familiar over the great. If you're in a negative work environment full of complainers, you'll find it hard to do anything but complain. If slackers surround you, you'll find that you may not put in as much effort as would make you feel good. It becomes a real effort to overcome what you're surrounded with — it is possible, but it takes effort. Our minds begin to consider what we're surrounded with as normal. The essence of the Third Reich propaganda campaign mounted by Joseph Goebbels was that if you tell people something often enough, they will come to believe it. And so many times, we pass on the steak because we think we really want Taco Bell.

Peter was writing to believers who struggled with that same problem. It appears that this letter was intended to be circulated along a mail route through what is modern day Turkey. Peter wrote this letter sometime in the early 60's AD. Christians had just begun to be considered by the Romans as a separate religion, and they were regarded with suspicion and fear. During this time, there was increasing suspicion of the Christians that culminated in the great persecutions under the roman emperor Nero. It was during these persecutions of Ad 64-68 that tradition tells us Peter was martyred. Roman historian Tacitus tells us that Nero even held an evening party where he strapped Christians to stakes, doused them in oil, and lit them as lamps for his party. It is possible that this letter was written after these persecutions had begun.

Many of the Christians of that time were despairing. Many were losing hope or feeling that their faith was a lost cause. Peter sends them this letter, teaching them how to be strangers in a strange land, how to be faithful in a world that is increasingly hostile to your faith, how to hold on to your hope when the rest of the world sneers at it. Today's passage is the introductory material, and in it, Peter reminds his readers and us of three things that will encourage us in

such times: our identity, our inheritance, and our support. That having been said, let's dig into the text (1 Peter 1:1-12).

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

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—kept in heaven for you, 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. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Take a look at verses 1-2. We have here some indications of our identity — elect, strangers in the world, who have been chosen. The surprise here is not the language of chosenness. The surprise here is *who* Peter applies this language to. In the Old Testament, the language of chosenness was always applied to Israel — We see a glimpse of this in Leviticus when God is promising blessing to Israel (26:9-12). Here Peter applies this language of chosenness to people *outside* of Israel. It is applied to a bunch of gentiles as well. Peter is recognizing the truth that chosenness has nothing to do with ethnicity — it has nothing to do with your background. It has nothing to do with your

accomplishments. It has everything to do with grace. It is God's grace — his initiative in reaching out to us. Peter's contemporary Paul makes the same point using very different language in his letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:26-29).

What this means is that we have a different identity. No matter what everyone else sees us as, we have a family to which we belong. Our identity cannot be taken away because it was secured for us by God the father, through Christ's work and is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit.

I know I've talked about Harry Potter up here before. The books have kicked up a lot of controversy — but they contain some valuable truths. You see, Harry was an orphan boy who lived with his terrible aunt and uncle. He was a little like Cinderella, forced to live in a closet, only got grubby hand-me-down clothes, treated meanly by his whole family. And then one day, a magical letter arrived. His uncle tore it up. The next day, three arrived; his uncle tore them up too. More and more arrived. They were letters telling Harry that he had a different identity — he was a wizard and he was invited to attend a magical and mysterious school so he could learn the science of magic. His uncle was determined to thwart every effort of the school to get through to Harry. He took them away to a hotel, but letters arrived there. Finally, he took them to a shack on an island in the turbulent waters of the English Channel. And there, a magical friend of Harry's parents, Hagrid, knocked down the door. It was time to go to school.

Though some of us may not be comfortable with the idea of magic, we can certainly see some glimmers of truth in the story. For instance, Harry has an identity — it will not be denied. Much like the Holy Spirit working on us, the people of the world of wizards would not let Harry go until he came to embrace that identity. Harry was a stranger in a strange land, and throughout the books, he always had to return to his family for the summer. And most importantly, Harry's identity destined him *for* something. He was to study to become a wizard. We too have been chosen *for* something — for obedience to Christ, which simply means loving God with all our hearts, minds and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Peter reminds us that, even in the midst of our circumstances, we have an identity that cannot be taken away. He also reminds us that we have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

If you've been to [Kenwood Mall](#) in the past few months, you've probably seen the enormous sand structure that they've built in the food court. This has become an annual tradition — a sand sculpture artist comes and guides local volunteers in carving out magnificent sand statues. They start in June and take a couple of months, working on some blocks of sand nearly 14 feet high. Hundreds of hours of effort go into these sand sculptures. This year, the theme is "The

Fabric of America.” The sculpture is of the folds of a giant American flag, and emerging from the folds are the Statue of Liberty, Ben Franklin at his printing press, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Edison surrounded by dozens of light bulbs, firefighters, astronauts. I was there earlier this week walking around the sculpture, and I couldn’t help but be inspired by the effort and the creativity it took to make such a moving and patriotic structure. And then I remembered that summer was almost over and they would be tearing it down soon. The end result of this fantastic display of human creativity is that it will become a pile of wet mud. They will hose down the whole thing, sweep it up, and haul it away. In a few short days — the tangible results of all that effort will be gone.

That image is a powerful reminder to me that everything we accomplish here on this earth is destined to dust. It’s kind of a sobering thought — but it’s something we are reminded of on a regular basis. Many people this year watched their inheritance wither as the stock market tumbled. Everything for which we work is ultimately dust.

The recipients of Peter’s letter had even more potent reminders of the brevity of earthly inheritance: suffering and persecution. Peter however tells of a living hope — living because Christ lives. He tells of an inheritance that can’t be lost. We can’t mess it up, it can’t be taken away by force, and it won’t decay. It is an inheritance kept for us — protected so that we will be able to enjoy it. And we are even protected so that we might enjoy it someday. What is this inheritance — nothing more than the fullness of face-to-face relationship with God. Paul gives us a glimpse of this inheritance in I Corinthians 13:12 — “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” It is the inheritance of being fully accepted, fully loved, and fully embraced by our creator. This inheritance is made available to us through faith in Christ.

So we have an identity and an inheritance. How do we use these to endure the tough times? Verses 8-9 present a situation for us — though we don’t see him, we love him and persevere in faith — but how? What nourishes our faith in such a way so that we can live out our new identity and hold on to the hope of our inheritance?

Verses 10-12 show us that the Scriptures give us that capacity to hold on. Peter tells us that the prophets wrote for our sake — they were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit in a way that no other authors have been inspired. The Holy Spirit directed the writing of the scriptures to point to Christ — his sufferings and his later resurrection. All the Scriptures point to Christ and the story of grace — That Christ was the only innocent person ever to live and because he suffered, the penalty for our sin is paid.

So this goes back again to immersing ourselves in Scripture. Regular exposure to the great story of what Jesus did for us, and how we should respond to that story, is at the heart of our devotional life. The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures and uses them in a special way to speak to our hearts. If we would be clear about our identity; if we would know more about our inheritance, then we must go to the source. If you are not in the habit, then try 5 minutes a day. Don't start with something grand — just pick a simple book like one of Paul's letters or a gospel and read through it. Then read through it again. Make notes. Mark up the text so you can internalize the information. Let it sink deep into your heart and take root there.

One of the bestselling books of all time is Pilgrim's Progress. John Bunyan, a Puritan who was jailed for his beliefs, wrote it. It's a fantasy tale of a young man on a pilgrimage through life. The Puritans had this wonderful understanding of this life as a pilgrimage rather than as a place where you settle. We're only here for a short time —we're strangers in this strange land. This is not where our identity is or where our inheritance is. The problem is that we want to settle here. We want to plant ourselves here and eat Taco Bell rather than continue the pilgrimage and get steak. Over the next few months as we explore the book of 1 Peter, we'll explore what it means to live like strangers in a strange land. We'll get into issues about the church, family, government, and employment — how our faith affects our attitudes and actions toward these institutions. I hope you'll come on the journey with me.