

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
1 Peter 1:17-23

Third Sunday of Easter, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 23, 2023

Strangers in a Strange Land

Introduction to the Psalm

The psalm today begins with a Song of Thanksgiving (1-4) for divine deliverance from some mortal danger—perhaps a grave illness. The psalmist reflects on the experience and will offer himself in thankful praise to the God who delivered him. Listen to these words from Psalm 116:1-4 and 12-19 . . .

Introduction to the Epistle

Our Epistle Lesson today from 1 Peter sounds like instruction to new converts. In an earlier form it may have been part of a baptismal message or teachings for those recently baptized. It was written to newly converted Christians who would find themselves living in a hostile environment, feeling like “strangers in a strange land.” So how are they to live? Listen to these words from 1 Peter 1:17-23...

Sermon

In the First Letter of Peter we are told of the letter being sent:

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood. (1:1b-2)

Some of you have lived in the Anderson area for many years, some all your life. Yet, the world around you has certainly changed. Just look at the housing developments that have sprung up across the road from the church. People used to send handwritten letters; now many send notes by email. We used to use the phone for calling others; now use the phone for multiple

reasons. Growing up, we could watch television in the evening and not be concerned about language or innuendo; now we find even some of the commercials offensive. When we were in college, speakers of different political persuasion spoke; now they are often shouted down by woke students. It used to be that people didn't work on Sunday; now most of the stores are open, and even some construction sites are busy. In the face of such changes, it's easy to feel, like the people of 1 Peter, a sense of exile, like strangers in a strange world. Like Moses who has fled Pharaoh and is now in the land of Midian, where the High Priest has given him one of his daughters, Zipporah, as a wife. When they have a son, Moses names him Gershom for "I have been a stranger in a strange land." (Ex. 2:22)

Writing to Christians who knew various forms of hostility, 1 Peter attempts to lay the groundwork for faithful perseverance. We read of new Christians as being ransomed, or redeemed, from the futile ways inherited from their ancestors—people who honored God with their lips, but whose heart was far away—ransomed, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. In the past, one might pay for sacrifices to be offered on his behalf with gold or silver, but now God has himself paid the cost in the precious blood of his Son, Jesus Christ—the unblemished Lamb of God. Therefore, in the face of persecution, hostilities, and threats, live a life of reverence.

As many of you have heard me say, I like to watch "Making It Grow" which is now hosted by Amanda McNulty from the Clemson Extension Service. It's about gardening and all things botanical, and comes on Tuesday evenings at 7:00 on PBS. It has been said that in the world of gardening, there are seeds that are perishable, and there are seeds that are imperishable. Anyone who has ever shaken the morning glory seeds off a dried-up plant in the fall knows this wonderful fact. The seeds fall like rain into the dirt below, and the next magnificent season of

“morning glory” is almost guaranteed. Not so with those six-packs of annual hybrids, planted one spring and gone forever at the first freeze.

Ransomed not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about “cheap grace” versus the “costly grace” of the gospel:

Such grace is **costly** because it calls us to follow, and it is **grace** because it calls us to follow **Jesus Christ**. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is **costly** because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is **grace** because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. (pp. 47-48)

The old campground hymn “Grace Is Flowing” proclaims:

Grace is flowing like a river
From the mount of Calvary.
Look to Jesus Christ the Giver;
He from sin can set you free.

Grace is flowing like a river;
Millions there have been supplied.
Still it flows as fresh as ever
From the Savior's wounded side.
(“Grace Is Flowing,” by Ron Hamilton)

An anecdote from the early 1900’s beautifully illustrates how Christians need to be grateful for what Christ has done for them. While on a three-story scaffold at a construction site one day, a building engineer tripped and fell toward the ground in what appeared to be a fatal plummet. Right below the scaffold, a laborer looked up just as the man fell, realized he was standing exactly where the engineer would land, braced himself, and absorbed the full impact of the blow. The impact only slightly injured the engineer but severely hurt the laborer. In fact, it fractured just about every bone in his body, and after he recovered from those injuries, he was disabled.

Years later, a reporter asked the former construction worker how the engineer had treated him since the accident. And the man replied: “He gave me half of all he owns, including a share of his business. He is constantly concerned about my needs and never lets me want for anything. Almost every day he gives me some token of thanks or remembrance.” Sometimes, unlike the grateful engineer in the story, we forget that on Calvary Jesus poured out his precious blood for us, for our sins, for our salvation.

In 1707 the English Congregational minister Isaac Watts wrote the words to the beloved hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Anyone who has stood at the foot of that “wondrous cross” and has been overwhelmed by meeting such “love and sorrow” will sink into silent worship. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article about the hymn, David Ritchie says:

The structure of the entire hymn has worked theologically and emotionally to guide the singers to this overwhelming moment. Now, in the final stanza, they are ready to present their entire being to Christ:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

In today’s reading, the Psalmist said:

For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
...
You have loosed my bonds.
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the Lord (116:8, 16b-17)

Presbyterian Pastor Jeff Paschal, whose mother I came to know while serving the Limestone Presbyterian Church in Gaffney, reflects those words as he tells about visiting with a family whose three-year-old son had been diagnosed with a large brain tumor that would require surgery:

A few days before the surgery, they asked me to come to their home to pray with them, which I did. Then the morning of the operation arrived. About a dozen family members, friends, and I sat in the waiting room of one of the world's great hospitals as a team of surgeons performed the most intricate surgery imaginable. Time crawled as we chatted and tried to think and talk about subjects other than what was actually happening in the operating room. Gradually, the waiting room emptied as work was completed on the other patients, and their families left. Behind our smiles, the tension building among us was almost unbearable.

Finally, after almost six hours, the receptionist called the mother and father of the boy over to her, and told them that their son had come through the surgery successfully. The couple collapsed into each other's arms, and, of course, the rest of us burst into tears of relief and joy as we hugged anybody in the vicinity. The receptionist herself began to cry and said, "Now you people cannot do this to me. I still have several hours left on my shift." A nurse also joined the celebration as she hugged us and proclaimed again and again, "Yes, He is able! He is able! He is able!" At last, the family asked me to pray with them. We stood and held hands in a circle, and I could barely choke out the words, "Loving God, we are so grateful..."

Peter says that in Christ God has saved us through the precious death of his faithful One. In *thanksgiving* let us continue to offer to God a thanksgiving sacrifice, and say our vows to the Lord, in the presence of the Lord and in the presence of his people. Not just by myself, or by yourself—but here, with God's people, together.

Then in 1 Peter 1:22 we read:

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

Love might come via eHarmony.com. Love might be fostered over the Internet—where backing out is always an option and where anonymity is highly sought after. But sincere and genuine brotherly love, deeply from the heart, is one of the hallmarks of the Christian's life. Such love is the authenticating sign of a renewed life. Such love is of the very essence of the Christian community. Peter knew that love from bitter experience. In that resurrection

appearance, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, and Peter replied three times that he did. Then Jesus told Peter that if he loved him, he was to feed his sheep and tend his lambs. (Jn. 21:15-19)

My friends, truth and love belong together and if separated the Christian life may degenerate into a rigid doctrinaire theology, or into a sentimental expression of goodwill. Many a sad church split could have been avoided if Christians had kept doctrine and love together.

By this love for one another shall all people know that you are my disciples.
(John 13:35)

First Peter presents a message to God's people who feel exiled, strangers in a strange land, encouraging us to be strong, endure suffering, live a life of reverence, confident that our faithfulness will have its reward.

A message reminding us of the Costly Grace that is ours through the precious blood of Christ Jesus. And the importance of our being thankful for that grace.

A message calling us to genuine love for one another, sincerely, from the heart, after God's own heart.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.