

Our Identity: Elect Exiles

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Date: 05 May 2024

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading will be from 1 Peter 1, verses 1-2, chapter 2, verses 11-12, and chapter 5, verses 12-14.

Our reading from the first letter of Peter. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to God's elect. Exiles scattered throughout the provinces of 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, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood. Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

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.

[1 : 2 3] With 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.

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. We, over the last few weeks, have been exploring the Apostle Paul and talking about the nature of the church, the New Testament vision on the purpose of the church as the one body of Jesus Christ and the way in which we are many different parts of that one body, that we have different gifts from the Holy Spirit, that we're to exercise for the building up of that body in love.

And we talked about the ways that we can be stewarding our time and our talents and our treasures to carry out the mission of God through his church. And so today we're going to continue in this focus of what it means to be the church, but we're going to shift from Paul to Peter.

And we are going to begin exploring over the next couple months this great letter of 1 Peter. Now you may be wondering, why 1 Peter? Well, in the last few paragraphs of Martin Luther's preface to his German translation of the New Testament, which he did about 500 years ago in 1522, Martin Luther said this.

[3 : 0 4] He said, Which are the noblest books of the New Testament? From all of this translation that I've just given you, you can now judge for yourselves all the books and you can decide among them which are the best.

John's Gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books.

They ought properly to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading, to make them as much his own as his daily bread.

For in them you find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation.

This is the real nature of the Gospel. If you haven't read much Martin Luther, that's kind of how he typically speaks. Big statements like that. But something to consider. Why are we reading 1 Peter?

[4 : 12] Well, it truly is a noble letter, and I hope that you'll come to find that. Now, who is Peter? We have a slide here of Rembrandt's depiction of Peter when he's an old man.

And if you're brand new to the Christian faith, Jesus Christ made Peter the leader of his 12 disciples, and he gave him this nickname, Petros, which means rock or rocky or rock man.

That's what, when Peter says, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, that's the nickname that Jesus gave him. And we preach the Gospel of Mark from Christmas to Easter, and we said when we were preaching that Gospel that Mark was the secretary and the translator of Peter.

And one ancient source says that Mark, quote, wrote accurately all that Peter remembered. So we spent months basically meditating on the memoirs of Peter and all of his memories about Jesus.

And so now Peter's an older man, and he writes this letter to these Christians, and he ends the letter summarizing his letter in chapter 5, verse 12. He says, stand fast in the true grace of God.

[5 : 28] And that's what we're gonna be exploring together in the coming months. What does it mean to stand fast in the true grace of God? What is the true grace of God? What does it mean to stand fast in the true grace of God?

Now as Peter opens this letter today, I think the message for us is that our Christian identity is apostolic, exiled, and elect.

Our Christian identity, the things that our Christian identity are based upon, is that we are apostolic, exiled, and elect.

And I'd like to just explore these three themes with you as we get to know this letter a little bit. Our Christian identity, first of all, is apostolic. Peter opens and he says, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Now God's grace had made Peter a disciple, had made him a Christian. It was by grace that God the Father revealed to Peter who Jesus really, really is. And Peter said, you're the Messiah, you're the son of the living God.

[6 : 34] But it was Peter who was not only called to be a Christian, Peter was also called to be an apostle. And what is an apostle? An apostle is this special, unique, particular calling as a sent one.

That's what an apostle means, a sent one, someone who is sent. And the meaning of this word is so much bigger and richer than that because it's one sent with a message and a mission.

It's one sent to represent another, one sent to serve as their delegate, one sent as a trained and authorized ambassador of the king.

And so Peter and all the apostles are speaking for the Lord Jesus Christ himself, speaking on his behalf. An apostle is someone who's been entrusted by Jesus with his message and his mission as fully authorized representatives of the sender.

And what are the qualifications of an apostle? What are the essential requirements? Well, no one could be an apostle unless they had seen the risen Lord.

[7 : 43] You had to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. And in the gospel of John, John chapter 20, we see Peter running to the tomb of Jesus on that Easter Sunday morning and it says that Peter saw the linen cloths lying there, this tight burial cocoon that Jesus had been put in, undisturbed, uncut, and yet somehow empty with Jesus' body no longer in it.

It's in the shape of Jesus' body, but Jesus' body is not there. And Peter, later on on that Easter Sunday night, he was there in the room where Jesus showed up in Luke chapter 24, and it says this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you.

And they were startled and frightened, thinking they had seen a ghost. And he said to them, Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet.

It is I myself. Touch me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet, and while they still did not believe because of joy and amazement, he asked them, Do you have anything here to eat?

And they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it, and he ate it in their presence. And then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. Peter, the apostle, was there.

[9 : 14] He saw Jesus. He heard Jesus. He touched Jesus. He learned from Jesus that most extraordinary Bible study on Easter Sunday night with the risen Jesus.

Peter was there in Matthew chapter 28 when the resurrected Jesus said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Now go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you. Peter is a trustworthy eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus from that first Easter day all the way, those 40 days, to Jesus' ascension into heaven at the right hand of the Father.

And the resurrected Jesus gave his own authority to his apostles so that they would go out and speak with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus gave them revelation and knowledge. He gave them the authority to preach and teach. He gave them the authority to lay down doctrine and ethics. He gave them the authority to establish people in the truth that was not merely a human word but was the very word of God.

[10 : 36] And the resurrected Jesus gave his apostles the authority to write this uniquely and divinely inspired New Testament and all the letters of the New Testament.

Now why is this important? It's important because you cannot follow Jesus Christ without following his apostles. We cannot follow Jesus Christ without following his apostles.

Many people say, I love Jesus but I'm not so sure about his apostles. People say, you know, there's parts of the letters of Peter and John and Paul and James that I have a hard time with.

I have a hard time with their doctrinal truth and their ethical demands. And what I want to make clear today is that that is not you disliking and having a hard time merely with the apostles.

That's you disliking and having a hard time with the resurrected Jesus. They are the special chosen mouthpieces of the resurrected Christ.

[11 : 48] And he said in John chapter 16, he said, I have much more to say to you apostles, more than you can now bear, but when he, the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

The Holy Spirit is going to come and guide my apostles into the deeper truth they need to preach and teach and write the scriptures and the New Testament. And friends, being a Christian means that we are devoted to the apostles' teaching.

So that when we want to find the truth of Jesus, we turn to what the apostles have written down. We are, let me put it this way, we are not being led by the Holy Spirit into Jesus-inspired and Jesus-authorized truth unless it is apostolic truth.

The truth of the resurrected Jesus has spoken through his apostles. And the reason I'm belaboring this is because if we are not apostolic, then what are we?

If we are not apostolic as Christians and as churches, then we are at the whim of the worst idiosyncrasies of strong personalities and faddish social trends.

[13 : 02] And if we are not apostolic, then we are shaped by powerful institutions and ideologies and influencers with agendas that curiously align almost perfectly with the political left or the political right.

If we are not apostolic, we are being formed by the internet and algorithms and God forbid, impersonal robots. thoughts? Yeah!

I mean, if that's what you're going for, I guess that's what you ought to be excited about being formed by. But what I'm saying is we need the objective standard of the truth that the resurrected Jesus has given to us through his apostles.

If you're exploring Christianity, my question for you is what or who is your ultimate authority for truth and life other than yourself?

And if you're a Christian, what is your daily intake of the apostles' teaching? And how literate have you become regarding the contents of their letters?

[14 : 18] And how much of your thinking and your priorities in your life is aligned with the apostles' teaching? I want to invite us today as we begin to explore this letter and challenge us to build our lives on apostolic truth, which is the one sure foundation that Jesus has given for his church.

You with me so far? Our Christian identity is apostolic, but more than that, our Christian identity is exiled.

Our identity as Christians is fundamentally an identity of being an exiled people. Here's what he says. He says, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

How does he identify these Christians? He says, you are exiles who are scattered, or the Greek word for scattered there is the diaspora. You're exiles of the diaspora. And then in chapter 2, verse 11, he says, Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which 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. What does he call these Christians? He calls them foreigners.

[15 : 44] Sojourners. Sojourners. Strangers. Resident aliens. Exiles. Why is he using this language of exile?

Why does he make this the controlling metaphor of his entire letter? Well, Peter is revealing to us the nature of Christian community and our relationship with surrounding cultures.

With this language of exiles and foreigners, he's revealing to us the nature of Christian community and our relationship with surrounding cultures.

We have a map if we can bring that slide up. It's a map of the ancient world which is modern Turkey. It's a vast area the size of California which the Apostle Paul did not evangelize.

He evangelized the southern part and went along the Mediterranean there. But Peter is writing to this central and northern Turkey which is known for diversity of ethnic groups and diversity of languages and cultures and a vast diversity of religions.

[16 : 53] And what you need to know is that Roman emperors would basically go on conquest. They would annex a region like the ones you see here and they would displace peoples there to strengthen the rule of the empire through a process of colonization.

So Claudius the Roman emperor who ruled from 41 to 54 AD he established colonial cities in all five of the provinces that Peter names and it was not uncommon for Claudius to deport groups like Jews and like Christians.

He would deport groups to colonies who were viewed as troublemakers back in Rome and he would basically send them away and so these Christians who Peter is writing to were most likely converted in Rome and then they were deported because they were being troublemakers they were deported to Asia Minor and there they're now living as displaced foreigners and dislocated outsiders.

These are the exiles of the diaspora to whom Peter is writing his letter and these Christians were not citizens of the dominant power. The cause of their alienation from society is their faith in Jesus Christ and their refusal to give allegiance to the gods of the empire.

And so the questions these exiles and foreigners are asking themselves is how do we relate to these surrounding cultures that we're in now? How do we live in this society that sees us as incomprehensible, that sees us and our faith as perhaps even offensive and dangerous?

[18 : 34] And now that we're suffering because of the ways of Jesus how are we to endure this disfavor and this rejection because of Jesus? And Peter is writing to show them how to live as exiles and as foreigners and he's basically saying in this letter let's get together and let's think about the story of the Bible and let's think about how in much of the Old Testament the people of God are living in places other than their native land.

Abraham and Sarah were called by God to leave their country and leave their people and leave their household and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived as foreigners in Canaan.

And then Joseph we remember and all of Jacob's children and eventually his grandchildren all the way down to the generation of Moses they lived as aliens and sojourners in Egypt.

And then later on the whole nation of Israel would be exiled from the promised land to live as strangers in Babylon. We think of the prophets Daniel and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and then later on they were resident aliens in Persia.

We think of Esther and Peter saying look the people of God have been scattered to surrounding cultures with different beliefs and different values and different ideals and different customs and different mores and different practices and he's saying to these Christians your identity and your experience as displaced people of God the disliked people of God it's nothing new.

[20 : 10] It's nothing new. And so here I am as an apostle of Jesus Christ to help you navigate what it means to be exiles for Jesus' sake.

So let's think together about these exilic communities of the people of God in Canaan and in Egypt in Babylon and in Persia. How did they live out their differences with all the other peoples around them?

How were they a counterculture of non-conformists? How did they bear witness to an alternative way of life? And how did they in the words of Jesus in John chapter 17 how did they live as in the world but not of the world?

Now the reason we're preaching this letter is because I think it has incredible relevance to Christians and to churches in North America in election year 2024 among other things that are happening in this season.

We could probably think of many examples of unbalanced and extreme relationships that churches have established with the cultures around them can we not? Because some churches say you know what we need to do we need to transform our culture.

[21 : 27] Our culture is clearly in decline and so we need to seek political power and we need to rectify the situation by imposing Christian beliefs and Christian standards on an unwilling populace.

Let's transform the culture. And other people come along and say no, no, no, no let's not transform the culture let's assimilate to the culture let's accommodate ourselves and let's embrace these various justice movements and movements of liberation so that we can be seen to be on the right side of history.

And then other churches say no, no, no let's not transform the culture let's not assimilate to the culture let's just withdraw from the culture. Let's retreat into these strong tight-knit sheltered communities with little connection to the rest of society so that we can avoid being polluted by it.

And then people say no, no, no let's not transform the culture or assimilate to the culture or withdraw from the culture let's just ignore the culture altogether. We just need to build up the church and win people to Jesus and leave the culture to take care of itself.

And what we're going to find in this letter is that this apostle of Jesus Christ is encouraging us to avoid all of these unbalanced excesses of being defensive against culture of being relevant to culture of being purified from culture of being unconcerned about culture and instead of all these things he's saying you as Christian exiles you as Christian foreigners should be distinctively and faithfully present within culture.

[23 : 04] not defensive against not relevant to not purified from not unconcerned about but distinctively and faithfully present within.

Just as God and Jesus Christ became fully and faithfully present among us and pursued us and identified with us and offered his life to us through his sacrificial love despite the fact that we were other in his eyes so this apostle of Jesus expects these Christian exiles to maintain their distinctive identity as those who've been chosen by God to be an alternative community while also provocatively connecting with and serving their neighbors rather than coercing them or disparaging them or avoiding them all without assimilating to the culture's ways or compromising the values of the gospel.

And as you see even when what we've read today he expects some aspects of Christian practices some aspects of the Christian social project will be both highly offensive and highly attractive to any pagan culture in which we reside as exiles and foreigners.

And he shows us in this letter how to be for the city which is part of our mission. how are we to be for the city how are we to seek the peace and the blessing of the city as exiles and as foreigners.

And over the coming months we're going to explore how the Christian community is to be distinctively and faithfully present within our culture so that we might be the salt of the earth and the light of the world that Jesus called us to be.

[24 : 57] Does that make sense? So our Christian identity must be apostolic but it also must be exiled and finally our Christian identity is to be elect.

And I'll close with this our Christian identity is to be elect. Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ to God's elect who've 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.

Peter wants them to know that the reason you're suffering trials as exiles and as foreigners is because you're God's elect. Because you bear this special status as His chosen people.

And Peter wants he says I want to help you know who you are before God so that you can be who you are in society. If you know who you are before God in this vertical dimension then you will know how to live in the horizontal dimension.

And what he says is that each of the three persons in the blessed holy trinity were involved in electing you. and this means that what most fundamentally defines your identity is not what Caesar Claudius does to you or not what Caesar has done yesterday and we're gawking about on the front page today.

[26 : 37] What most fundamentally identifies you is not how your pagan neighbors are relating to you or what they're saying to you in real life or about you in the media. None of that really matters.

What really matters and what fundamentally defines your identity is that you are in a relationship with the triune God.

And what's most important about you is the fact that you are objects of his loving concern from all eternity. He says you've been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

That means that you've been intentionally, deliberately, and actively chosen. That he chose you according to and consistent with his plan and purpose of salvation.

And so you are in a relationship with God and with the people of God not because of what you are or what you have or what you've done or what you have decided but simply because God before you were aware of him decided in his purposeful plan to bring you into a relationship with him as your Abba Father.

[27 : 57] Friends, there's no identity that's deeper or stronger than that. No matter what your present circumstances are, no matter how people are treating you, no matter how dislocated and disoriented you feel, God took the initiative to draw you into an intimate, loving, redemptive relationship with him to save you and to give you access, 24-7 access to his fatherly goodness and grace.

You, the people of God, have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. And he says you've been chosen also through or by the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the means. The Holy Spirit is the instrumental agency and power by which God the Father takes hold of us and regenerates our heart and convicts us of sin and quickens our grasp of the gospel and gives us faith.

The Holy Spirit is the one who makes the electing foreknowledge of the Father operative in our lives. And the question for us is has the Holy Spirit acted on you in this way?

And is the Holy Spirit dwelling in you now? Has he sanctified you? Has he set you apart to the Father and to the eternal plan that the Father has for your salvation?

[29 : 29] If the Holy Spirit has done that, what then is the goal and the purpose of the Father's plan carried out by the Holy Spirit? He says you've been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, you've been chosen through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and you've been chosen for obedience to Jesus Christ who sprinkled you with His blood.

If your sins have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross, if you are now part of the new covenant because of that great sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf, then Peter says the only logical deduction, the only necessary consequence is that we must obey.

We must be obedient to all that has been commanded of us by our risen and living Lord Jesus. Because if we have this great privilege of being elected, then we bear that great responsibility to live in accordance with the character of the one who elected us.

So friends, do you think of yourself this way? Do you think of yourself as God's elect, foreknown by the Father in all eternity, set apart by the power of the Holy Spirit, cleansed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and chosen to be obedient?

To obey, chosen to be obedient. Peter ends his letter and he says, stand fast in the true grace of God. If you take your stand in this grace, this grace of the triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if you stand in that grace, then you will know how to live as exiles and foreigners, and you will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

[31 : 37] So stand fast. Stand fast as God's elect people, chosen by him, foreknown by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, chosen to be obedient.

it. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.