

3 / Parish Retreat 2018: Following Jesus in a World that Doesn't

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[0 : 00] I'll start with a little show and tell. Thank you. I need to have good posture because microphones work. If you can join 1 Peter, I've plagiarized everything. James asked me if I was just going to read from the commentary this morning. I said, well, it's worked for the last day.

This is one of the best commentaries I've ever read. It's by a scholar I've never heard of named Karen Jobes. It is so readable. For Bible studies, for personal devotion, this is gold.

So, 1 Peter by Karen Jobes. And then this is a wonderful book called Everyday Church about how the church should adapt itself to reach people in the 21st century. Written by an English pastor and an American pastor, which I think averages out to a Canadian pastor.

So it's very well. Those are my main sources. I actually gave a 12-part sermon series on 1 Peter last year. And I've had to whittle that down to three. So you're getting the greatest hits. But I think my CD's for sale the best. Next time. This is actually too tall in my posture. I can't feel James' shoes.

So I'll let you fumble with that while I talk. Thank you. Would you agree or disagree with the following statement? The church today is in trouble? Judging by the groans, most of us would say...

[1 : 36] Yes. Locally, think about our city compared to 25 years ago. Think about our city compared to 50 years ago.

Here in Vancouver 50 years ago. More and more and more secular. Faster and faster and faster. 25 years ago. 25 years ago we met on Nantam Street on Grand Paul. We don't anymore, do we? Across Vancouver, local churches with rich histories are having to close down and they're being demolished almost weekly as the final few parishioners are unable to cover the cost of upkeep and mission.

Nationally, many churches and their leaders are failing in proclaiming and protecting God's word and instead are propagating teaching that betrays traditional biblical faith. And then globally, in Western societies at least, if not exclusively, churches are riddled in conflict, immersed in scandal, paralyzed with problems within, and therefore unable to reach out.

Stuck in the past with little idea of how to move forward into the future. Stuck in the past with little idea of how to move forward into the future. As a Christian in Canada, if ever a time to say, the church is in trouble, is not now the time?

[2 : 53] Surely the church is in trouble. To this argument, on the eternal words of Christ, I will build my church.

The gates of hell never prevail against it. Do you believe him? Today? Peter's original readers were Christians experiencing alienation, rejection.

They were being misunderstood and wrongly judged for following Jesus in a culture that didn't. They were struggling to keep their faith amongst a powerful secular current that was trying to push them the other way.

Christians are losing hope. They are losing steam. They are and were at risk of being crushed by the unending pressures of a non-Christian world suffocating their faith.

The gates of hell, seemingly, are prevailing then and now. Perhaps you struggle in following Jesus.

[3 : 59] Perhaps you endure being labeled as intolerant. Or you are suffering being judged as judgmental and declared simple-minded because you're a follower of Christ in a world that proudly, defiantly dismisses him.

And if that is you, being crushed under the unending force of Christ in a culture that pursues everything but you, Peter gives us these words. Here is Peter's encouragement.

Here is your encouragement to take home to Christians in a non-Christian context. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you have not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Peter tells Christians whom the culture is rejecting four truths that define who we are.

This is our identity. Four descriptors that God gives his people. Chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, my own prized possession.

[5 : 18] To God's people in their weakest moments, when it seems like the great biblical vision gives over, when God's people are scattered and suffering, this is when God declares these truths.

So don't be discouraged. The cost of following Christ is high. But remember, we're a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's precious possession.

And the gates of hell will never prevail against us. This is a time for honesty. I need hands for this. Who here, this is time for confession, who here has ever played or witnessed be played Super Mario Brothers? This is very important.

I see that hand. I just won a bet with my wife. So I think dinner's on you tonight. It's here. When I was a kid, there was this video game.

[6 : 26] I'm speaking to the people who didn't raise their hands. Do you know what a video game is? When I was a kid, I was a video game. Not that gammon. It was called Super Mario Brothers. And in Mario, the whole point of this game is to walk carefully through the level.

In a foreign land, you are in exile. An elect exile, if you will. And you need to be really careful as you trudge through this mysterious, magical place.

Because one wrong move. You walk into a bad guy, you step off a cliff, and you're done. Game over. Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum.

That's what happens when he dies. Alright. You essentially play the game, if you play like me, in total terror. Slowly, tentatively, trying to move across the screen.

Because you are always intimately aware of your vulnerability and your mortality. With no certainty that you will survive. It's actually a really scary game to play, if we're honest about it.

[7 : 37] Except, amazing girls, in Super Mario Brothers, every so often, a precious star pops out of the top of the screen.

And once you, Mario, receive that star, you transform. It's a transfiguration. No longer are you merely a mortal.

No longer are you weak, a vulnerable Italian plumber, trying to run across a foreign land. No, no. The normal restrictive rules of Mario's mortality no longer apply, once you receive the star.

Mario, in the twinkling of an eye, is remade. He recreated. He glitters. His colors change, and they flash, and special music comes on.

And Mario receives this supernatural ability to run and jump and soar across the level. But most importantly, when you are twinkling and flashing, and the music's on, and you're running across the screen, you are unbelievable.

[8 : 40] You have no vulnerability. You can't die. If you run into a bad guy, the rules of combat are reversed. Because you have the star, they die.

You don't. You instantly are immortal. And if you've played Super Mario, you should go home and play it, if you never have, so you know God's word better. Once you receive the star as Mario, your entire strategy changes.

You become bold, confident, and fierce. No longer timid and cautious. Because no matter how dangerous the opposition, you know you'll prevail.

You have the star. You can't die. Jesus is the only man in history who died, who defeated death, and who rose again to prove it.

He's the only person who now, today, stands alive and victorious over all creation. He's the only one who stands with the Father in glory, with the keys to the gates of hell dangling in his hand.

[9 : 50] And as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus, the Lord of Life, declares that his church, his faithful followers, will never be destroyed. We're like Mario with star power.

We can't die. And to prove it, God the Holy Spirit has made his home in us. He's the down payment. He's the proof. He's the security that guarantees that Jesus is alive, and he's defeated death.

God's presence and power emanate from our collective body, despite our physical frailty and weakness. And once you realize that victory is assured, that we can't die, our entire strategy changes.

No matter the cost, no matter the rejection or cultural marginalization, we can be confident that our destiny is assured.

We are living stones, as he is the living stone. We will not taste death. We will never be abandoned to the grave. We are precious, chosen by God.

[11:03] Now certainly in this world, we might lose buildings. We might suffer hardship. We might lose jobs. We actually might have our church closed down.

But the physical building, in fact the church entity, St. John's Vancouver, is not what God is talking about, is never dying. It's us. We are the ones who will last through eternity.

Our faith is the deposit that will never fail. So to the elect exiles, to beleaguered, discouraged Christians, trying to follow Jesus in a world that is trying to overrun them, God declares, you are a chosen people.

You are a royal priesthood. You are a holy nation. You are my special possession. So that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Here are the four things today that give us our identity. This is what defines the church. These are the four things we need to hear. First, we are a chosen people.

[12:16] We've heard this in every talk. Peter constantly returns to this refrain. We need to remember it. God has chosen us. He has chosen you. He has written your name in the book of life.

With the blood of his son. You are incorporated into the family of God. We are chosen, handpicked, created, selected before the beginning of time to inhabit this place and this time with these people in this context.

when Jesus came to build his church. When he hung on the cross, he looked forward to this day when these people, you and I, would be assembled together to form his church.

And that's why he endured. You are chosen. You're not here because you're a great person, a moral model, an outstanding citizen of the kingdom, but rather because God in his mercy has chosen you.

He's chosen to reveal his grace to you. And he calls you to respond by gathering with his people to form his church. We are a chosen people.

[13:28] Secondly, we are a royal priesthood. We are all together, collectively, a royal priesthood. We are all priests.

Now, that doesn't mean that our pastors, you know, the real priests, are redundant, as some churches have claimed.

This isn't the first time God calls his people to a royal priesthood. He does it in Exodus chapter 19. And when he does that, there already was a priesthood, the Levites, under Aaron, Moses' brother. So we, as the church, can have official priests, thank heaven, with unique tasks. But understand that my priesthood, and James' priesthood, is to serve the collective royal priesthood of the people of God.

The job of pastors, it's the title I prefer, so we don't get confused, the title of our real priests is to minister within the church, to equip all of you to now be priests outside the church, in the world.

[14:37] And Peter writes about this in chapter 5, of 1 Peter. So the purpose of my priesthood, within the church, is to shepherd or pastor you, in order to unleash you, to be a priest in the world.

Ephesians 4, verse 11. God gave all the spiritual leaders, including pastor and teachers. Why? To equip the saints, to you, to equip the saints, for the work of ministry.

The work of ministry is the church's job. I don't like being called a minister, because my job isn't minister. My job is to equip you to do ministry.

So don't call me a minister. The work of ministry is the church's job. The building up the body of Christ, Paul teaches, is our collective calling.

We are all ministers, because we are all called to ministry. Now notice, we're not just called a priesthood. We're called a royal priesthood.

[15:37] A royal priesthood. A royal priest is someone who reports directly to the monarch, to the queen or the king. So we're called a royal priesthood, because we all serve as priests responsible, directly to our king, to Jesus.

But there's another meaning of this as well. You are also a royal priest, if you are royalty. When you believe in Christ, we're told we're adopted into the family of God.

God becomes your father, Christ your brother, and we become to one another a family in faith. In Galatians 3, for in Christ Jesus, you are all daughters and sons of God, through faith.

And since we are all children of God, we are all related as children to the king of kings. And therefore, we're royalty. And therefore, we represent the king wherever we're sent.

Canada turned 150 last year, and unfortunately, the queen didn't come. Do you remember who came? Charles. Charles. Charles. Charles King.

[16:45] But it was a royal visit, because he represented his mother, the queen. I'm not that down on Charles. I thought you could all use a giggle.

So we're royal priests, because we represent our royal family wherever we go. We represent the king as his children. Thirdly, more quickly, a holy nation.

Holy is one of Peter's favorite words in this letter. It means set apart, different, unique. And then the word nation, the second part of that, in the original language, is ethnos, which is where we get ethnicity.

So you could translate this, a holy ethnicity. What Peter is saying is that if you were part of the church, your worldly nationality and biological ethnicity is relinquished.

You're no longer Chinese. You're no longer Canadian. You're no longer American or African. You're no longer, at your core, white, black, or anything in between. You're now part of God's holy nation, his kingdom.

[17:49] And this is your new identity. Paul, writing to the church's unity, declares, again in Galatians 3, for as many of you were baptized into Christ, have now put on Christ.

So there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. We are a holy nation above all else.

Lastly, you are God's prized possession. My brother-in-law, Jordan, who many of you know, has a favorite quote by a theologian named, Abraham Kuyper.

And it says this, there is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine.

There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not declare, mine. Everything is God's possession.

[18:50] All things come from him. Praise God, from whom all blessings flow. However, we, the chosen people, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, over us, God declares, above everything else, I treasure you.

I love you. I give my life for you. And over us, one day God will come to wipe every tear from our face, to forever put death to death.

One day God will come fully and completely to dwell with us forever. We will see his face and he will gaze lovingly into ours. And at that moment, for all eternity, you will know, I am his and he is mine.

We are his prized possession. Four things that define God's people. All of those things, God reminds us, define who we are. This is who the church is.

And all of these things can be attributed to us because of what Jesus has done. And so in the second half of verse nine, I just want to read what our call is.

[20:02] If that is your identity, here is your vocation. To proclaim, to declare, the excellencies, the mighty praiseworthy acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Our job is to declare the amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. To celebrate the mercy that I have freely received and to freely invite others into it. To be a priest at large, bringing God to my workplace or my school or my home.

To put the goodness of God on display in everything I do. To spread the fragrance of Christ. To reflect that I am now part of a chosen race.

A royal priesthood. A holy nation. Part of God's prized possession. And in so doing, to invite as many people as possible to hear God's good news.

And to invite them to receive it. And with us to celebrate our new everlasting identity in Christ. The church is God on mission.

[21:10] The church is God's chosen instrument. It's his only instrument. There's no backup plan. He uses in his wisdom us to reach the world with his gospel.

And if you look at the history of the world, it's working. So friends, do not be discouraged when it seems like all is lost. When it seems like we're heading towards a dismal death that our world will celebrate if they even notice.

The church has challenges. But the church is not in trouble. The world is what is perishing. We are God's chosen race. His royal priesthood.

His holy nation. His prized possession. We form his eternal spiritual house. And as long as we are built upon Jesus Christ, our cornerstone, we will never fall.

God is doing a work in us that will stand for all eternity. So take heart as you follow Jesus in a world that doesn't.

[22 : 16] Amen.