

April 26th, 2020

1 Peter 1:17-23 “Stranger Things, Bible Edition”

The lectionary does something weird on this third Sunday of Eastertide. One of the choices for New Testament texts is from Acts 2, which we usually don't get into until Pentecost in May. But that's the one I chose last month when I was putting my preaching schedule together. Why? Because the other choice it gave me was from 1 Peter, which I automatically dismissed without even reading it because I have a bad attitude about 1 Peter. 1 Peter is where we get the “slaves, in reverent fear of God, submit to your masters” text. And so I tend to avoid the whole book because of that one passage. But it's in the Bible, and the Bible is what lights our path, so I looked at it again with fresh eyes, which seems to be our unintentional post-Easter theme this year.

So here's a little history about 1 Peter. What we know about the people who received this letter is that they were an early, marginalized, and sometimes persecuted community of Christians. What throws folks off is verse 17 in the New Revised Standard Version, which is what we typically use in church – “Live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.” What exile? This isn't during the time when Israel was exiled in Babylon. What's the writer talking about? This is where it's helpful to have other translations. I like the Common English Version that Mary read. It says, “So you must honor God while you live as strangers here on earth.” “Strangers on earth?” That makes these Christians sound like aliens. Yes! We're a lot closer to understanding this passage if we think of this group of Christians as aliens rather than exiles. When we hear the word exile, we think about someone who was sent here because they were kicked out of another place. When we think, “alien” we think, “You don't belong.” Well that's *exactly* what was happening here. These people who committed their lives to following Jesus discovered that their new way of life was so radically different from the majority, they felt like aliens. They were alienated. Hence the marginalization and the persecution. The CEV makes it clear that the land is not strange because these Christians have moved or relocated, but because they feel

like aliens. Due to their faith and their participation in the Christian community, they view their environment through an entirely different lens. The question this passage addresses is, “What should we do?” What should we do when we feel like strangers in a strange land? What should we do when we feel like we don’t even belong in this place anymore? What should we do when it seems everything is shifting and changing around us and we’re suffering? The answer is, “Be reverent.” Uh-oh.

I’ve never been accused of being a “reverent” person, at least as far as what our culture’s understanding of “reverence” has become. When you think of the word, “reverent” what comes to mind is someone quiet, reserved, docile, and who defers to authority. But the better understanding of the word is “living in confident knowledge that we are in relationship with God.” Not in an obnoxious, “God likes me better than you” sort of way, but in a peaceful, “I know that I am with God and that God is with me,” way. And this is communicated pretty clearly in this passage:

- Verse 17 and 18 - Our relationship with God does not depend on external factors. You don’t *have* to be born into the right family or nation or people because God shows no favoritism.
- Verse 19 and 20 - Our relationship with God was established before the creation of the world and just as the blood of the lamb brought liberation to the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, so too has Jesus brought liberation to us from slavery to sin.
- ***Just as suffering and death did not keep God from Christ, neither will suffering and death keep God from you. Our faith and hope are in the God who is with us and within us.*** Remember that. That’s the phrase that pays this morning, and we will revisit it again before we’re through.

There are two things that I believe to be true today –

1.) We are living in strange times. And not because of our current COVID-19 crisis either. We are in the midst of a shift. We are bearing

witness to the unravelling of the Kingdoms of the World. The old paradigms ... the kingdoms and cultures of this world are crumbling around us. But what is there to take its place? Good question. If you listen to Jesus' teachings, the Kingdom of God is unfolding to occupy the space taken up by the World's Kingdoms. This has been happening for a while. It's just becoming more evident as time passes. Think about that, meditate on this, because I think that all of us at some level have been bearing witness to this and we feel it in our gut.

2.) The second thing I believe to be true is there will be resistance to this shift from the Kingdoms of the World. Any time the Kingdom of God starts breaking through, there is fierce resistance from the Kingdoms of the World. It's been this way since the beginning of history, and we see it played out over and over. Think about how many times this cycle is played out just in our scriptures. We're in Eastertide. We just learned about this in the story of Jesus. Jesus came into this world as an ambassador of God's Kingdom. He spent his earthly ministry teaching about how the Kingdom of God is so different from the Kingdoms of the Earth, and how we must be ready to embrace God's Kingdom. He even taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom Come thy will be done on earth ... on EARTH as it is in heaven." When we get into our study of Revelation, it's going to shock the heck out of you when you see that the kingdom comes here, not the other way around. We are in a shift. There will be resistance.

Corrupt institutions and even corrupt religion are going to try to get you to believe that everything is okay the way it is. Corrupt religion will try to tell us that it's okay to keep living out of sync with creation. It's okay to keep all the old divisions and wars and feuds alive and to keep fighting among ourselves and to make sure there's always an "other" to fear and hate. "Just keep on doing what you're doing ... it's all going to be irrelevant anyway. Might as well just keep plugging along. Who knows, maybe we can speed things up a bit and Jesus will come take us away sooner!"

But consider this: Maybe it's okay to let these old institutions and seats of power come to an end. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Fine. Then let's not be afraid to let some of the things in the old system die so that something new can come to be. But the temptation, of course, will be to return to the same old familiar routines, habits, business practices, routines, structures, and institutions that have been the trademarks of the Kingdoms of the World. And again, these powers will push back. Fiercely. But maybe not in the way that we think. See, I think they're going to try to gaslight us. And if you're not familiar with that term, here's what it means. It's when someone, typically an abuser, tries to make the one being abused think they're crazy and place the blame on themselves. "You're the crazy one, not me."

As the world tries to figure out how to open back up again, powerful forces will try to convince us all to go back to the old normal. "What? That never happened. What are you talking about?" Billions of dollars will be spent on advertising, messaging, television and media content to make us all feel comfortable again. And the thing is, we all *want* to feel "normal" again, including me. We want desperately to feel good again, to get back to the routines of life, to not lie in bed at night wondering how we're going to afford our rent and bills, to not wake to an endless scroll of human tragedy on our newsfeeds. The need for comfort will be real, and it will be strong. And every advertiser in America will come to your rescue to help take away that darkness and get life back to the way it was before the crisis. I urge you to be well aware of what is coming.

What this crisis has shown us, though, cannot be unseen. Los Angeles has clear blue skies because there aren't so many cars out on the gridlocked freeways. In a quiet New York, you can hear the birds chirp in the middle of Madison Avenue. Coyotes have been spotted on the Golden Gate Bridge. Dolphins are swimming in Venice. These are the postcard images of what the world might be like if we were better stewards of what God has given us. But again, the powers and

principalities of the World's Kingdoms will do everything in their power to convince you that it's all "fake news." They will gaslight us. "Oh, that picture was taken four years ago before this crisis. They've been doctored up with Photoshop. Come on, let's just put all of this behind us and get back to "normal." Let's keep the old divisions alive. Let's spend billions on things that don't matter so that we can feel good again. Let's just put all of our deeply disturbing social problems on the back burner again, get back to work, and move forward. And before you say, "Oh geez, Pastor's getting all political," let me tell you that this gas lighting is going to come from the political left *and* the political right. It will come from advertisers and businesses. It will come from each other. Do anything, spend anything, and believe anything, just so we can take away how horribly uncomfortable all of this feels.

People of God, you are not crazy. You are in the midst of a shift. Let's take a deep breath, ignore the clamor and think about what we want to put back into our lives. As a church, let's start thinking of ways we can help this new Kingdom come into being all the while holding on to the assurance that as Christ's church, *our faith and hope are in the God who is with us and within us.*