

Third Sunday of Easter – April 30, 2017

1 Peter 1:17–21

17 Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

No one likes to be the stranger. No one likes to be the one who is different. Have you been the stranger, the outsider before? It's the first day of school and you don't know any of the others students, you feel alone. It's game day and you go to the party and you're the only one rooting for the other team, you feel outnumbered. Try traveling to another country. In traveling to China, Julie and I were certainly strangers. We looked different, we didn't speak the language, we didn't know all the customs. Going down the street people would give us looks because we just didn't fit in. We never felt uncomfortable in any way, but we were definitely strangers in a foreign land. It is human nature to want to fit in and feel comfortable with our surroundings. And yet in our text through the apostle Peter, God tells us the opposite—to live as strangers in this world. And so this morning we will look at first, why we are to live as strangers and second, how we are to live as strangers.

Peter's first letter was written to Gentile Christians who were living in the region of Asia Minor, today the western part of the country of Turkey. This was where the apostle Paul had started churches on his missionary journeys. These Christians were living among Greek culture, under Roman rule and so they would face many pressures, if not even persecutions, to fit in with the world around them. This letter was written as an encouragement to endure and to live as strangers. This world was not their true home—they were mere strangers passing through on their way home to heaven.

The key idea to why they were to live as strangers was the simple fact that they were redeemed. They were purchased; they were bought back—bought back from sin, death and the power of the devil. Verse 18 explains that they “were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers.” What was that empty way of life? The religion of the Greeks and Romans involved many different gods—gods who were superhuman in power and abilities and yet also very human in their mistakes and weaknesses. Life was about doing things to please these gods who might or might not look favorably on them as a result. Such a religious life would be empty because they left it up to the whims of gods who were not real in the first place. In fact they were simply under the power of the devil. It would not be possible for them to be redeemed from such a life “with perishable things such as silver or gold” (v. 18), they could not buy their way out of that empty way of life.

Verse 19 presents the only solution for their redemption, that they were redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” Only Jesus' death on the cross could pay for their sins and buy them back from the power of the devil. Peter brought in the religious imagery from the Old Testament which revolved around sacrifices and lambs and blood. This would make these Gentile Christians stand out as different in a Greek and Roman world. You worship a man who died? His blood is precious to you? You consider him to be a

lamb? Such worship would not help them to fit in with the world and culture around them, but it was absolutely necessary because Jesus was their only chance at being redeemed and saved.

So what is the empty way of life handed down to us from our forefathers? Our culture today may not have the pantheon of gods and goddesses like the ancient Greeks and Romans, but a wide variety of empty gods still remains. For some it's a pursuit of perishable things—if we have enough wealth and material possessions then life will be good. For some it's an abandonment of any absolute truth—I can do whatever I want and no one had better tell me otherwise. For some it's a delusion of deeds—if I do enough good things for others and this world, then in the end I will be able to save myself. We have these attitudes all around in this world. We are even tempted to incorporate them into our lives so that we better fit in with those around us. But ultimately all these paths are empty because they do nothing to redeem us from Satan's power. We know that perishable things are just that—perishable. They will not last and cannot bring us true happiness. We know that any attempt to establish our own truth is tainted by sin and the only absolute truth comes from God. We know that our deeds, while helpful to others, will do nothing to help ourselves when it comes to our “Father who judges each man's work impartially” (v. 17).

And so we live as strangers, we are different than those around us because of who we worship. You worship a man who died? Yes, we do because this man was also God and so he also rose from the dead and conquered death's power over us. His blood is precious to you? Yes, it is precious to us because it washes away our sin and frees us from its punishment. You consider him to be a lamb? Yes, he is the Lamb of God because he was sacrificed in our place so that we could be bought back from the control and power of the devil. People will look at us as strange and different for our believing such things, but that's okay, because this is the only way for us to be redeemed. As strangers we know we are merely passing through this world on our way home to heaven.

In verse 17, when it came to living their lives as strangers, Peter instructed them to do so “in reverent fear.” Going back to that empty way of life handed down by their forefathers, when you're worshipping a pantheon of gods, everything operates on fear. You have to do things to please the gods or else they will punish you. This makes sense because when you are dealing with the old self, the sinful nature, a fear of punishment is the only thing that can be used to keep it in line.

But as strangers, redeemed by the blood of Christ, they now had a new self and so this fear changes. It is now a “reverent fear.” God is no longer someone to be feared because of possible punishment, but someone to be honored and respected for everything that he has done to take away that punishment. Peter explained that in verses 20 & 21: “He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.” Jesus was chosen and revealed for their sake. He was raised and glorified so that they might believe. They did not have to live in fear of punishment, they could live in reverent fear of God who had given them faith and hope for their lives.

As Christians we are not immune from fear. We still carry our old self with its sinful temptations and the consequent fear of punishment for the times we give in to those temptations. We live in a sinful world which can bring about any number of losses to fear: loss of life and health, loss of friends and family, loss of employment and income. And then there is the devil who is always at work to pull us away and so we even fear losing our faith.

We may not be immune from fear, but living as strangers we are different because we have the solution to fear. God is in charge. Jesus was chosen, revealed, raised and glorified for our sake, so that we might believe! Yes, our old self can only fear punishment, but our new self knows that Jesus took on our punishment. Yes, we will lose most things at some point in this life, but what we stand to gain in heaven is far better. Yes, the devil can still threaten, but his head has been crushed under the foot of Jesus through his life and death and resurrection. We will still face fear in this life, but Jesus has conquered all our fears. And so our fear turns to one of reverence for our Redeemer. He gives us faith to believe in him. He gives us hope to know that a better day is coming.

No one likes to be the stranger. No one likes to be the one who is different. You feel alone, you feel left out, and you feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. And yet as Christians we live our lives as strangers in this world. Our beliefs will separate us from the world around us and that's a good thing because it's the only way for us to be redeemed and saved from the control of sin, death and the devil. We live as strangers in reverent fear because our fears have no power over us, in Christ they are removed and replaced with the sure hope of a better future to come. We live as strangers and yet we are not alone with our Savior on our side. Amen.