

“Strangers”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Last month I came across a news report of a student who wanted to promote a prayer event at her school. The event was “See You at the Pole.” The students gather around the flagpole (in the courtyard) and spending time praying for our nation and for each other.

Maybe you've heard about this kind of thing. Some of our own students are doing (the same kind of thing) here in San Jose. This particular student, she wanted to hand out flyers to the other students, but was told she couldn't because there was a Bible verse (on the flyer) quoting Jesus, talking about God's love for the world.

What was interesting about the article is that it gave examples of other things that were allowed on campus. One of them was a promotion endorsed by a hip hop singer, named “Lil Wayne.” They were quoting “Lil Wayne” on the flyer, talking about “good weed and alcohol.” “Lil Wayne” was OK. Jesus was not.

Examples (like this) are not hard to come by these days. We see the marginalizing of Christianity. (It increases every year.) Last month, during the Christmas season, I read about a school district that removed all of the religious references from the song, “Silent Night.” I'm not sure (when they sang it) what was left, what they did? Maybe they just hummed it.

Not long before the holidays, a North Carolina pastor was relieved of his duties as the City Council chaplain because he closed one of his prayers in the name of Jesus. Last spring, a counseling student at a University (in Illinois) was told she would not be able to graduate if she didn't stop sharing her faith (so openly) on campus.

These stories are becoming increasingly more common. It seems as though we have stopped being a nation “under God” and are slowly becoming a nation “Over God.”

For the next four weeks we're going to be spending time in a series we're simply calling “Strangers.” It's based on the first letter of Peter, in which the writer (Peter) takes on some of these same issues.

Now, in some ways, this series feels a bit random. It's not a follow-up to the last few weeks we've spent with our Vision. It doesn't neatly fit in this particular time in the (church year), leading up to Lent, where we follow Jesus' journey to the cross. Nor is it designed (necessarily) to coincide with the start of our Grow Groups.

What it is, is a series that takes on issues that are becoming increasingly more common (in our world) and, as a result, increasingly more relevant (in our lives).

And (honestly), as a pastor, when I see (and hear) some of the responses Christians make in conversation, in the newspapers, on (social media), I want to cringe. Most often, it's not helpful. As Christians, we need to know how to address what's happening (in these areas) in a way that will help (and not hurt) the cause of Christ.

If you want to turn in your Bibles or (your Bible app) to First Peter, chapter one, that's where we're starting today. Peter is writing to Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. Their faith was costing them in some real ways. It's just beginning for them. It's going to get a lot worse. Nero was in power, and it's not going to get better.

And so, he's writing to them about living out their faith in this culture. Many of the believers (in those days) were being ostracized because of their faith. They were facing a very uncertain future. Some of them had lost their jobs; others had lost their homes. Worst cases, there were Christians being tortured and (even) beheaded. That kind of thing is still happening today, in parts of our world.

Before getting into (Peter's letter) itself, it might be helpful to take a (step back) and spend a few moments talking about persecution in the context of church history. It's always good to have a bit of perspective on these things.

A man by the name of Charles Pope (and here I'm leaning on his research, more than anything), has done some good work identifying the different stages of persecution, not just in (the first century), but

throughout church history. He gives these five stages of religious persecution that most often take place. I think it's helpful to see some of this (spectrum) before getting into the letter. (I'll go through these rather quickly.)

Stage one is stereotyping. This happens when a description of a few is applied to an entire group, and then it gets repeated again and again and again. (I don't know if that sounds familiar?) And so, Christians get stereotyped, and you end up hearing descriptions like, (Christians are) hypocrites, boring, angry, repressed, sad, whatever...things such as that.

Stage two is vilifying. When Christians don't line up with what's culturally accepted, especially when they speak out against those things, they're going to be vilified, meaning that they'll have words used to describe them that indicate that they're taking other people's human dignity away from them. And so, you'll hear words like close-minded, judgmental, hateful, intolerant, bigoted, homophobic, and so on.

You can start to see the progression, from stereotyping to vilifying. It's a way of helping people feel better about not liking a particular group. It's a way of justifying a certain position that (actually) ends up being rather intolerant itself.

Stage three is marginalizing. This is what we're going to be seeing more and more of. After establishing Christians with these different stereotypes, where they're vilified, the shift then is to move the church (and Christianity) into the margins of society. (This is historically what has happened.)

They may say things like, "You can have your church and believe what you want, but don't bring those beliefs into the public square." And so, (as a result), Christians become excluded from positions of power and influence, be it in the media, academia, business, and so on. It becomes increasingly more unacceptable to talk about your faith in a public way.

For example, you'll hear of athletes being told that this is a "sports interview", so don't say anything about Jesus or about your faith while we're on camera. It's not uncommon. It becomes more unacceptable to mention God and, as a result, there's this marginalization of Christianity.

Stage four is criminalizing. In this stage there is an increasing amount of legislation or lawsuits directed against the church or (individual Christians) for living out their faith. Practicing your faith can turn into a lawsuit.

Stage five is persecuting, the degrees of which can vary quite a bit. It could be heavy fines, loss of job, loss of property, incarceration. In some places in the world (as we know), it can become quite violent.

And so, the question is, "How are Christians to respond? What are we supposed to do, in a world (in a culture) where it's increasingly more difficult to be a follower of Jesus, where it starts feeling like we are in the minority?"

Here's what we need to see. (Make sure you get this.) There's a tendency (when this happens), when we starting feeling like we're the minority, to feel discouraged, to think that (what we're doing) doesn't matter. Like, "I've been praying to God and he's not hearing." Or, "I'm trying to be faithful, but everything around me is changing so fast."

There's a tendency to feel discouraged (when this happens), but we shouldn't. In this series, what we're going to find is - we're going to be talking about how (when this happens), when we find ourselves in the minority, we really have a greater opportunity for the gospel, for spreading and sharing the name of Christ.

Historically, that's exactly what has happened. Christianity has increased (most rapidly) in situations where Christians were in the minority. You'd think it would be the opposite, but it's not. When we're in the minority is when we have the greatest opportunity for advancing the message of Jesus.

Peter wants us to understand that we have this opportunity, and so he begins his letter with these words, he says (in verse one), "To God's elect, (to the ones he has chosen), strangers in the world, scattered throughout the (various regions)."

That's how he starts his letter. (That's how he describes us.) He's says we're "God's elect," we're "strangers in the world." Other translations say that we are "refugees," that we're "among the dispersed," that we're (people who) "lodge for a while," while we're here.

Peter uses these words to describe who we are. These are "identity" words. We are "chosen," we are "strangers," we are "exiles," we're "refugees." This is how he starts. He starts with our identity, (and he does so) because it's from our identity that our behavior is to follow. Our behavior flows from our identity. (That's how it works.) If it doesn't flow from our identity, the relationship we have with God, it's not going to work.

You know how that works. If you try to tell somebody how to live, (if it's not who they are), it's not their identity, it's not going to happen. You can pass laws, you can establish requirements, but if it doesn't flow from who they are, it's a dead end. Peter starts with our identity and, from there, he'll (go on) to talk about our behavior, how we're called to live. (We'll get into that in the next few weeks.)

Now, many people think that if you're a Christian, (if you're following Jesus), that you'll be protected from these things (we've been talking about), from stereotyping and persecution. (Many people think that...if you're following Jesus) Not Peter. Peter says the opposite.

What he says is - he says if you're a Christian (you're following Jesus), you're not protected from these things happening, you can expect these things to happen. He says, "Don't be surprised." (He says), "God has not abandoned you." (He's with you.) And (being with you), he's giving you an opportunity to be a witness for him.

Again, (as a pastor), it troubles me that many Christians have been in churches where they've been told that (when you're a Christian) your life will be better, that you'll be free from all of this world's troubles. (It's not true.) Peter says that (when you're a Christian) and you're actually living it out, the odds are you'll probably have more troubles. It's the way it is in this world. We need to be honest.

That's why we need to know who we are (our identity) and (because of our identity), to recognize (and to realize) that this world is not our home. It's not our home. (I hope you know that.) This world is not your home. Your home is in heaven. (That's your home.)

Now, we're here, you're here, (I get it), and this is our home, but it's not our home. Our home is in heaven with God in Christ, and so (while we're here), Peter says, we're exiles, we're foreigners, we're strangers in a world that is so different. It's so different.

Look at what it says. Verse three, (it says), "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you..."

That word "kept" is an important word. It means it's there. It's secure. It's not going away. It can't be changed. It can't be cancelled. It can't be lost. In Jesus (Peter says), God has made a reservation (in heaven) for us, a reservation (in heaven) for you.

In John's gospel, (Jesus says), "I've gone to prepare a place for you." There's a home being prepared (for you) in God's kingdom. So don't be worried (Jesus says). Don't be panicked. Don't get all worked up if things in this world don't go your way. They're not going to always go your way, not while you're in this world.

In fact, if you're following Jesus (again), most likely they won't. But don't get worked up. You have a reservation (he says). You have an inheritance. It's "being kept" in heaven for you. It's yours.

Now, (from there), Peter's going to talk about the connection that's possible between our suffering and our joy, between living here (in this world) and looking forward to the life that's ahead of us. He says that (as Christians) you can be filled with joy, even when you're suffering. You can be joy-filled, even when things in this world aren't going your way.

Verse six, "In this you greatly rejoice (in this inheritance that's being kept for you), though now for a little while (he says) you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." He says, "Don't worry about it. It's temporary. It's only for a little while. It's for the moment while we're here and you're 'passing through.'"

During this past month, (the last few weeks), I shared in three different memorial services; two of them for members here at St. Timothy's; one for my mother-in-law whose life came to an end far too quickly. They each had good lives. They each had full lives: one in her eighties; two in their nineties. But it all happened so fast. Life goes by fast, too fast.

Peter's not minimizing our suffering. (Don't miss the point.) Suffering is suffering, and it's not easy and it's not fun. Peter understood suffering. (He lived it...more than you and I ever will.) What he's doing is he's putting it in perspective and reminding us to not get too worked up over it. It's only for "a little while."

Verse seven: "These have come (your struggles) so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes, even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Did you hear it? That's how it works. That's what happens when gold is refined in fire. It becomes more shiny and bright. In the same way (Peter says), when you're under fire, it's not a sign of God's failure to

remember you, as much as it is an opportunity to become stronger and brighter (and more shiny) in this world for him.

The question for us is, as we're faced with this world's troubles, are we going to respond in anger or in joy? That's a great question. And it matters. (Don't think it doesn't.) How we respond when we're stereotyped or vilified or marginalized, (whatever it is) when we're treated as criminals and persecuted because of our faith?

My friends, we must look awfully shallow (to the world) when we claim the promises of Jesus and then lose our minds when things don't go our way. If you're following Jesus (in this life), things (in this life) aren't always going to go your way. They're not. Be honest. Get over it!

Instead of worrying about avoiding persecution (and not fitting in), we should be worried about what happens when we always do. If you follow Jesus and live as the Bible tells you, you won't always fit in. We're not supposed to fit in and, as a result, there might be a bit of suffering. (It might happen.) But it's only for the moment.

The question is: "Where's your hope?" ("Where's your hope?") If your hope is in government, the latest election, the most recent poll, always wanting to fit in, then you're in trouble, because those things are changing all the time. What doesn't change and what will never change is the identity we have in Christ, the calling we have to be witnesses for him, and the way in which, even in our sufferings, we can live this life with joy.

Let me give you an assignment. For these four weeks, we're in the first letter of Peter. As your assignment, read through First Peter. There are five chapters. (Read a chapter a day.) Let it take hold. Let it sink in. (If you have time, go back and read the whole thing.)

And when you do, think about what Peter is telling us. Think about what God is telling you through him. And then, think about your own life, the challenges you face because of your faith, the challenges you avoid because you're not living it out as you could, and the opportunity you have, in accepting those challenges, to be a voice in this world for him.

Our hope is not in the things of this world. Our hope is in Jesus, and in what he has accomplished for us on the cross. It's a living hope. It's a secure and lasting hope, waiting for us in heaven. And so, while we're here, (while you're here), for a short while, like gold in the fire, it's an opportunity to shine for him. Amen.