

“... During the Time of Your Exile”

1 Peter 1:17-23

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Easter III

On Friday we received two pieces of significant news – first, that the Governor has issued another Executive Order, extending the “stay home, stay safe” mandate to May 15, though easing up on some of the restrictions; and second, that the leadership of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan – which has oversight over the Presbyterian churches and clergy in our region – is advising all the churches not to resume in-person worship until at least July 5. The first piece of news was not really a surprise; I think we were all expecting that something along those lines would be coming from the Governor’s office sometime before the end of the month. The second, though ... the second felt like a kick in the gut.

July 5. Yes, they really did say *July 5*. That is ten weeks from today. We’ve already been living in exile, so to speak, for seven weeks; this recommendation more than doubles the length of time it will be until we can worship in person together again. It is a *recommendation*; it’s not a *mandate*; we haven’t been specifically told that we *can’t* ... but it’s probably not wise to go *against* specific advice we are receiving from our church leadership. In my head, I had been thinking that the earliest I would be comfortable re-opening for worship was the beginning of June. After all, the public schools have been closed through the end of the school year, and if *they* are shut down, I can’t see any justifiable reason for *us* to be open, given the fact that we have a much higher percentage of high-risk individuals than the schools do. There are so many factors for us to consider – space in the sanctuary, refreshments, Sunday School, Adult Sunday School, Kids’ Church, the nursery, church security, ushers, greeters, sound board operators, passing the offering plate, sharing communion, cleaning and disinfecting, social distancing, and the natural desire we will all have to *hug* each other when we can see each other again. Then add to that the confusing, and sometimes contradictory, information that’s coming to us from the news media, public health officials, and various members of the government. Sometimes it sounds like things are getting better; other times it sounds like we could still be social distancing a year or two from now.

The simple fact of the matter is ... we don’t have enough information yet. We still don’t know what the best practices are for how to *really deal* with the coronavirus. Maybe I was being optimistic when I thought we might be able to consider resuming worship in June. Maybe July is more realistic.

So we better sit back, relax, and prepare our hearts and minds for what will be a long haul. *Ten weeks*. Ten weeks – *minimum*. It might end up being longer than that. That’s a long time. So the question is, how do we live, as Christians, in the meantime? During the time of our exile?

It really is remarkable how helpful our scriptures can be in times like this. The first epistle of Peter is in our lectionary readings for this season of Easter. And what a *perfect* set of readings it is.

We started this letter last week. That sermon is online, if you missed it. I'm going to pick up where we left off, and just take one verse at a time. There is *so much here* that is relevant.

Verse 17. "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." *Live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.* Peter was talking to Christians in a bunch of churches who were experiencing discrimination or persecution. We're not sure of the exact details. Peter calls the stress they were under *the time of their exile*. They weren't being kicked out of their homes, like the Jews who really *did* get exiled, seven centuries before Christ. Nor were they being mandated to *stay* at home, like most of the world today. But they were living in a time of *fear*. They couldn't go about their "normal lives" in a "normal way." They were afraid of the Romans; we are afraid of the virus. They knew people who had been *hurt*; we know people who have *died*. They were worried about what might happen to *them*; we are worried about what might happen to *us*. They didn't know how long the crisis was going to last, how many weeks or months or maybe even years before their lives could return to normal. Neither do we. There are *so many* parallels here! They lived through a metaphorical *exile*. We are living through one too.

So Peter's advice is *absolutely* relevant. "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds" – that is, if you believe in God, the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who will come to judge the quick and the dead – "*live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.*" *Reverent fear.* Fear – *of what?* Fear of the *Romans?* Fear of the *disease?*

No. Fear of *God*. Remember the One *who made you*. Remember the One *whom you trust*. Remember the One *whom you serve*. Remember the One *whom you follow*. Remember the One *whom you worship and praise*. Remember the One *who has called you*. Remember the One *who loves you*.

When our lives are turned upside-down, it is easy – *easy!* – to let the stresses and strains and fears overtake our lives. It is easy to forget that there is Someone who *created* you. Someone who *loves you*. Someone who *was willing to die for you*. Someone who *is always with you*. Don't let yourself be so consumed by what is going on, by all the things you *can't do* right now, by all the concerns you have for yourself and others, that you forget that *there is a God who loves you to the moon and back*.

"You know that you were ransomed," Peter says, "from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." Peter's not telling these people anything they don't already know. He's *reminding* them of God's great love, *reminding* them of all that Jesus did for them. He's reminding them because – well, frankly, because sometimes we just need to be reminded about things we already know. We have this tendency to forget what matters, what's *true*, *especially* when we're under stress.

I did it on Friday. When that news came in, that double whammy, and I sent out an email to the whole congregation, *I forgot* what matters, what's really true. I said in that email, "Hang in there ... this is tough, but we will get through it!!!" What I *should* have said was: "Hang in there ... this is tough, but *God* will get us through it." *I forgot*. In case you didn't know this already, your pastor's not perfect!

Sometimes we just need reminders. Peter knew that. The Christians in those congregations were under stress. They were forgetting what matters, what is really true. So he simply *reminds* them.

"He" – Jesus – "was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake." This wasn't a new teaching. They knew this! God had Jesus in mind from the

very beginning. Jesus came *for your sake*. Jesus came because he loves and cares about *you*.

“Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.” There are three parts to this sentence: “through him you have come to trust in God” – yeah, duh, that’s old news; “who raised him from the dead and gave him glory” – yeah, duh, we know that already; “*so that your faith and hope are set on God*” – oh, right, we forgot about that. God – whom we trust and believe in – raised Jesus from the dead and ascended him into heaven – why? *So that our faith and hope are set on God*. No matter what happens here on earth, *our faith and hope are set on GOD*. God is still up there. God is still looking out for us. That persecution that happened back then? That didn’t change this fundamental truth. This plague that’s happening right now? That’s not changing this fundamental truth. *God is still worth believing in. God is still looking out for us. God still loves us. And at the end of all things, God is going to put it all right.*

We forget that, don’t we? In times of stress, we listen to the media, we listen to the health officials, we listen to the politicians ... but do we listen to *God*? The one whose *Word* is trustworthy and true? The Alpha and the Omega, the First and Last, the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come?

The one who – more than anyone else – can truly bring *hope* to the *hopeless*?

So how do we live during these times? Peter tells us. “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.” We take the gifts that God has given us – the *truth* that has been implanted in our hearts, the *love* that grows up within our hearts in response to God’s love for us – and we just simply share that love. “Love one another deeply from the heart.” Times are tough! Things are crazy! So what do we do? Live in fear? *No!* Love one another? *Yes!* Don’t just sit at home feeling sorry for yourself, for all the things you can’t do right now. Do something that shows *love* to your fellow human beings!

I’ve been blown away by all the little things that have been going on in the life of this church over the last seven weeks. The people who pick up the phone and call someone to check to see how they are doing. The people who have been offering help to other people, in a whole variety of ways. I’ve received a multitude of cards, some flowers, some cookies, a bag full of face masks, and two loads of groceries. I’ve been blessed. I’ve been *loved*. I hope that *everybody* in this congregation has been receiving someone else’s *love* these past seven weeks. I also hope everybody in this congregation has been *giving* love these past seven weeks. Some of you *excel* at giving love, it comes easily and naturally to you. But is there anyone out there who has been sitting at home, *in fear*? Anyone out there who hasn’t reached out *in some way* to brighten somebody else’s day? Peter is talking to you. “Love one another *deeply* from the heart.” What can *you* do to love someone else *deeply* from the heart?

One final reminder. “You have been born anew, not of perishable but imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.” You have been born anew. You’re a *Christian*. You’ve been given a special calling: to be an ambassador of God’s great love. No matter what may be going on in the world, *that doesn’t change*. The seed that God has planted in you *can not* wither away – though sometimes we may forget it’s there. Peter’s reminding you; I’m reminding you: *you’re a Christian*. And what do Christians do – *even* during the time of our exile? “Love one another *deeply* from the heart.”

We’ve got at least ten more weeks of this. *God bless you* as you do what *he* is calling you to do!

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