

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Chosen Strangers
1 Peter 1:1-2

In a masterpiece created near the end of his life, French artist Paul Gauguin painted a huge triptych showing people at different life stages from birth to death. In the upper left corner of the painting he wrote words to this effect: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? “That triptych now hanging in the Boston Museum of Art,” Philip Yancey notes, “poses a grand summation of Gauguin’s work and a grand summation of the questions to which modernity has no answer.”¹

That isn’t literally true. Calvin, of Calvin and Hobbes cartoon fame, for one, had an answer. “Paul Gauguin asked ‘Whence do we come? What are we? Where are we going?’” precocious, six-year-old Calvin tells his mother in one comic strip. “Well, I don’t know about anyone else, but I came from my room. I’m a kid with big plans, and I’m going outside! See ya later!” A couple frames over he pokes his head back inside and asks his mom: “Say, who the heck is Paul Gauguin anyway?”

Gauguin was of course asking the basic questions in life. And when Yancey says the modern world has no answer, I take him to mean that underneath all the somewhat superficial answers we’re served up every day, young Calvin’s happily carefree remarks included, we’re finally left unsatisfied. The answers we typically hear are like smoke curling faintly upward from a campfire, disappearing into the cold night sky—flimsy, unconvincing, fleeting. Who are we? Workers? Consumers? Audiences? Voters? Crowds? Owners? Tourists? Students? Citizens? Critics? Fans? Yes, in a sense, all of that and more. But is that it?

Once we’ve gotten our fill of those roles, those partial identities, we’re left yearning for something deeper. Like Gauguin, we might still lie awake from time to time in a rare moment of quiet and wonder *who are we, really?* It’s a worthwhile question. The kind Socrates had in mind when he said the unexamined life is not worth living.

Think for a moment. When was the last time such questions crossed your mind? Someone has said “Our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘manyness,’ he will rest satisfied.” “Let’s face it,” another person adds . . . “When we are overly tired, we tend to become numb to what matters most in our life.”

So here we are, sitting in a room together, with space to think during a few moments of calm in otherwise busy lives. And here, again, are the persistent but often hidden questions, the ones that matter most: *Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?* And now here is the answer *God* speaks to us through his servant Peter in the opening words to a letter he wrote now two millennia ago:

Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ, to the chosen, strangers in the world of the diaspora in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, because of the obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.²

In a simple yet profound statement, Peter merges two images not usually paired together: chosen, and strangers. He wants to show his mostly Gentile (not Jewish) readers who they are, and he does it by echoing the Scriptural story handed down for generations within Israel and in a sense, writing their names into it. Israel was a *chosen* people. The great Exodus story works that identity into their bones. But later the Israelites also became *strangers*, exiles in the world. The tragic story of captivity in Babylon fits that label uneasily onto their shoulders, stirring up a vigorous tradition of wrestling with God over such a troubling fate. *If we're God's chosen people, why are we suffering the fate of exiles, strangers in someone else's land?* The one identity—*strangers*—put a question mark over the other—*chosen*—to such a degree that to do as Peter does, to put them together in one sentence, is both odd and startling. So why does he do it? What's he getting at?

To understand what Peter's up to, we need to remind ourselves of the whole sweep of the biblical story. I often tell students that the whole biblical narrative, from Genesis to Revelation, can be summed up memorably in just five words: creation, broken creation, new creation. That's the whole story. And it's within that story where we find the reason for Peter's strange collision of identities—chosen strangers—and thus the deepest answer to the questions that matter most.

The story begins, of course, with God, it continues with God, and it ends with God. We are in the story, too, but the part we play only makes sense in light of the central role of God. This is the significance of the poetic quotation from the book of Isaiah later in Peter's letter:

**All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.³**

God is first, middle, and last. And he starts everything off with a mighty act of creation, good creation. He sets the world to life and motion and admires his attractive, ordered work. Specially designed as the very image of God, human beings inhabit an abundant, flourishing garden with meaningful, important work to do. Marriage nourishes and sustains human life and gives it effectiveness in the world. Adam, Eve, and God relate in a relaxed, easy way together, enjoying one another's company. And we're only up to Genesis chapter 2.

And then tragically, painfully, regrettably, Adam and Eve do the only thing in all creation they were counseled by God not to do. Suddenly, like a gale force wind, sin sweeps into the good creation and leaves a trail of broken relationships in its wake. Their relationship with God is broken and damaged as they hide from him, gripped by fear. Their relationship with one other is broken as they each blame the other in turn. Their relationships with themselves are broken as they feel the pangs of shame deep within. Even their relationship with the rest of the creation is broken as they follow the advice of another creature instead of exercising God-given dominion over it, finally trying to blend in with the trees they were designed to take care of. Everything

else in the biblical story after Genesis chapter 3 betrays the scars of this one seismic rupture that distorted what God had so carefully crafted.

The story could end there, the supreme tragedy of all time. But God demonstrates one of the qualities he will most be known for, his faithfulness to his creation. He sets in motion a series of actions intended to restore the goodness of creation, from clothing Adam and Eve, to showing mercy to Cain after he murders his brother, to the rescue of Noah and his family and all the animals of creation from the flood. God is relentlessly faithful. And when the generations after the flood prove just as sinful and hardened against God, at a time when I suppose most of us would just give up on the whole project, God does something surprising. He selects a single person, Abraham, along with his wife Sarah, and promises to bless them in such a way that the whole broken creation will be blessed and restored to its original intent through them.

After a long journey full of twists and turns in the plot, Abraham's descendants find themselves outside of the land God had promised them, slaving away under the hot Egyptian sun. And it's what God does next that makes everything Peter tells the churches in Asia Minor come into focus.

Like a series of contractions leading into the intense labor pains of an expectant mother, the plagues God sends on Egypt and the struggle between Moses and the Egyptian magicians, between Pharaoh and Yahweh the God of Israel, bring the Israelite slaves to the waters of the Red Sea, where they finally pass through the waters and come out the other side as God's newborn son.⁴ Soon they are receiving instruction from God about the life he means for them to live in the world. He will dwell in their midst, in a tabernacle housing his mysterious, invisible presence. They, for their part, will camp around him and serve his purposes all their days, learning the shape and texture of life from him. And the point of it all is for God to bless them so that they by their blessed existence will in turn bless the rest of creation, drawing all people and nations into this restored created order with God himself at the center.

Peter deftly picks up on this whole story of Israel's birth and childhood training by God as they prepare to receive their inheritance from God as adults, the land of his promise. But Peter now refracts Israel's story through the lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁵

And just as the Israelites of old were trained through their desert wanderings to follow the good leading of God, so too Peter instructs and woos, counsels and coaches:

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.⁶

Next comes a call that is as liable to turn us off through discouragement as it is to become what it means to be, a source of wisdom and guidance, a sort of North Star to lead us through life. Peter says this:

Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”⁷

Now practically everything in today’s message hangs or falls with this one quotation, so it’s critically important that we get this right. This isn’t what we often think. It’s not saying that we should be really, really good and not do anything bad. It’s not just doing all the things we already know we should do and not doing all the things we already know we shouldn’t do. It’s not just a matter of being “better than everybody else.” What the Bible has in mind is even more radical than all that, and it’s not first of all about what we do. In fact, we can really only get what Peter is talking about here if we know something about the ancient world and its gods.

In the ancient world, every people group was attached to its particular god or gods. And the gods, in one way or another, shaped the life, the identity and values and practices, of that particular people. This was as true of Babylon and Canaan, the places where Abraham came from and ultimately went to, as it was of Egypt, the place out of which Israel was born.

So when Yahweh the God of Israel says to his newly formed people, **“You shall be holy because I am holy,”⁸** he is telling them something incredibly important about himself, and therefore in turn about them. “Holy” here basically means “different,” “distinct.” God is teaching Israel that he is not like the other gods. Rather, he is different and distinct from all the rest, not least in the fact that he does not appear in the form of an idol you can see and touch but rather he is not to be figured or pictured at all. In his love for and faithfulness to his people and in fact all the peoples of the world, and as creator of the heavens and the earth, the God of Israel is unique, distinct, not to be equated with the other gods, without rival or peer. He is, in other words, holy.

And because Israel’s God is holy, different, distinct from all others, so too his people, deriving their identity and mission in life from him, are similarly to be holy, which is to say that they are—we are—to be different and distinct from all other people.

Peter counsels the kind of chosen-for-strangeness that we’re not used to. And truth be told we’d rather not live in a way that’s so out of kilter with our peers most of the time. Still, we are called to live in a way that doesn’t make sense to everyone in order to fulfill God’s saving, new creation purposes in and through Jesus Christ.

Because he knows God’s character of radical love that shows up in the life of Jesus, Peter again and again informs his readers that one of the key ways our difference, our distinctness from others will show up is by our love for and grace toward people who mistreat us, starting with those closest to us in the church. So he can say things like:

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.⁹

Notice he doesn't say to just love our *friends* in the church, but everyone. He can also say:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.¹⁰

And again:

All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.¹¹

This, I think, is Peter's way of passing on the lesson he learned from Jesus, to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. That is an unmistakable sign of the holiness—the different, distinct character of the one true God and his chosen people who are strangers in the world.

Mark Labberton learned an indelible lesson in loving one's enemies from a feisty 85-year-old church member who was carjacked by a heroin addict in Berkeley, CA.¹²

“When Doris was hijacked outside the church that Sunday morning,” Labberton recalls, “she realized that Danny [her captor] had a lot more problems than she did. She understood that to be [the church] is to love all people, especially those who don't love us.”

And so, Doris engaged Danny in conversation, told him he was loved by Jesus Christ, “and told him that when he was finally busted for his crime, she was going to be in court insisting that he get the help he needed to overcome his addiction and promising to help him herself.”

Doris' ability to reach out in such a way resulted from her innate understanding of shifting paradigms in contemporary life — a shift that mirrors the progression in the Old Testament “from Exodus to Exile,” as Labberton puts it.

“Exodus is a paradigm of good guys versus bad guys,” he explains. “The options are pretty limited and simple — you either leave them behind or you kill them. The quest is for the promised land and when it doesn't pan out where you are, you pick up and go somewhere else.”

Though much of the American ethos is built on the exodus paradigm, Labberton says, the Bible points to a different paradigm — Exile — that seems to better exemplify contemporary American culture.

Rather than exiting from a land that turns out to be less than promised... “This is a vision that places people under the authority of enemies and then demands that they remain faithful even in that context.” Labberton cites the prophets Amos and Hosea as proponents of that paradigm. I

would add 1 Peter, as well. The entire letter is written to promote that way of understanding the church's life in the world.

In such a context, loving one's enemies is imperative. This is what Doris understood. For Doris, the issue is not getting mugged or not," he says. "It's what you're going to do *when* you get mugged. The capacity to [bless] is not there if we fear rather than love our enemies."

The Christian church today is one of exile, not exodus, Labberton insists. Therefore, "The . . . church is called to be those who in this context choose to love our enemies.

"We seek the welfare of others because it is intrinsically in the heart of God to want that," he concludes. "We all have opportunities to practice this and, like Doris, we should seize every opportunity."

Travel back in time with me for a moment, to the years when the Roman Empire was on its last legs, to a little town in North Africa. "In this nothing town," as James O'Donnell tells it, "the sun of the Maghreb outside the hall is relentless, but the shade between stone columns within is cool. Men stand on one side, women on the other, all hushed in concentration on the deliberate gestures of one man. He sits, dressed simply and plainly enough to attract attention, one step above the crowd at the end of the hall and listens attentively as a younger man reads a short account of two brothers competing for their father's attention, a contest the younger wins by trickery. Their names are Jacob and Esau.

"When the reader finishes, the older man rises and begins to speak. The quiet deepens as his voice fills the space effortlessly...

"The story of the two brothers, he tells his listeners, is part of a larger story. All these events happened long ago and in a very different world to the people he calls 'Judeans,' and the story of the two brothers is one part of a larger story. The Judeans go into exile in Egypt and then escape through miraculous waters, for their god is powerful and favors them, up to a point.

"The story, which most of us probably recognize, is still fresh for his audience and perhaps even unfamiliar to some. It has a contemporary message for the people standing before the speaker—'Christians' he calls them—and as he continues, persuasive and eloquent, he brings it home. They, too, have been through miraculous waters, and so the old story of the Judeans is somehow their story as well:

Brothers, look and see: the Judeans were liberated in the sea, the Egyptians were destroyed in it. So Christians are liberated by the forgiveness of sins, and sins are destroyed in baptism. The Judeans go beyond the Red Sea and walk through the desert. It's the same way with Christians after baptism: they're not yet in the land of promise, but they live in hope. The world *is* a desert, but it becomes a real desert for the Christian after baptism if he understands what he has received. If he doesn't receive only the outward signs of the sacrament, but if these signs really take spiritual effect in his heart, then he understands how this world is a desert for him. He understands that he's living

like a stranger here and that he sighs for his true homeland. But as long as he's sighing, he lives in hope. For in our hope we are saved.

“For the merchants and lawyers and officers and gentlemen in the audience, the alienation from the ordinary, comfortable social world around them, the saving and healing alienation that the speaker evokes, might not be obvious. He assumes that without him to tell them, they would go on about their business blithely at home in the world, thinking of nothing else. Is he speaking to an alienation he senses in them and shares with them, or is he creating it by his words? He tells them, at any rate, how they can and should read their own lives differently by reading, or hearing, the story of Jacob and Esau and their nation...

“Because he had shared this and other stories and tried to make them throw light on the contemporary life of this tedious North African town, the audience can go away thinking of themselves in ways that would puzzle many of their neighbors. The stories this man, [Augustine of Hippo] tells let the congregants rewrite themselves into other roles, with improbably hopes and unexpected responsibilities and pitfalls. If they can believe his interpretations of the stories, they would indeed be citizens of a great invisible city that differed in many ways from their ordinary condition...

“Within the walls of this place, the speaker is in command, uncontested. But as soon as his audience disbands, they enter a world where his authority is more problematic. Some of them have their doubts about what they have just heard, seen, and done. But for today, they made the choice to be there.”¹³

And how about us? Who are we going to be when we disperse today? And what will we do? We too decided to be here, listening to the scriptural story, hearing that we are chosen by God to be strangers in the world. Well, now what?

¹ Adapted from Philip Yancey, “What Art Can—and Can’t—Do,” *First Things* (Feb 2009, No. 190), 35.

² 1 Peter 1:1-2, translation by Joel Green, in *1 Peter* (The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 14. All other quotations are from the NRSV.

³ 1 Peter 1:24-25.

⁴ Exodus 4:22 anticipates this “birth” of Israel. Hosea 11:1 also echoes this same event with reference to Israel as God’s son. I owe this birth-and-growth metaphor to Eugene Peterson, from his introduction to “The Message” audio version.

⁵ 1 Peter 1:3-5.

⁶ 1 Peter 1:13-14.

⁷ 1 Peter 1:15-16.

⁸ Leviticus 19:2.

⁹ 1 Peter 1:22.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2:11-12.

¹¹ 1 Peter 3:8-9.

¹² This story is freely adapted from an article entitled “Exile on Main Street,” by Jerry L. Van Marter, *Presbyterian News Service*, August 18, 2008.

¹³ James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 1-3.