

Southport Presbyterian Church

Rev. Jim Capps

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Reflecting the Light

I Peter 2:9-10

Have you seen the movie, *Cinderella Man*? It's about James Braddock who had been called the Bulldog of Bergen in his early years when times were better. At the time of the movie the nation is in the Great Depression and Braddock, played by Russell Crowe has had a promising career cut short by injuries and arthritis. To make matters worse, he couldn't get a job as a dock worker in New Jersey and had to get public assistance in order to care for his family.

The opportunity comes to make a comeback in the ring. His intensity wins fight after fight so that he can put food on the table for his wife and children. Finally the day comes when he won the right to fight the heavy weight champion of the world, Max Baer, who has ruthlessly killed two men in the ring. In the days before the fight, Baer mocks, ridicules, and threatens Braddock.

When the day for the title fight finally arrives, Braddock's wife, played by Renee Zellwinger, hurries through the maze of hallways in the great arena just moments before the match began. She marches straight up to Braddock and locks her husband in a tender stare just before he is supposed to go into the ring. Hers will be the final words that he will hear before the fight.

"So you just remember who you are," she says. "You're the Bulldog of Bergen, and the Pride of New Jersey. You're everybody's hope, and the kid's hero. And you are the champion of my heart, James J Braddock."

Remembering who he was in the eyes of his wife, children, and friends made all the difference in the world to Braddock. In what seemed to be completely impossible, James Braddock, the Bulldog of Bergen, beat Max Baer that evening to become the heavy weight champion of the world. Braddock brought courage and hope to a whole nation which was in very difficult and uncertain times.

Remembering who we are is crucial for us as individuals and us as a church as we move into the New Year. In many ways, we are in a season of transition and change, trying to determine what God is calling us to be and do in the days and years to come.

The same thing was true for the readers of Peter's First Letter. Nero, the deranged Roman Emperor was wreaking havoc on the church. They faced the uncertainty of persecution and suffering.

In the midst of all of that, Peter passionately tells them to remember who they are and their God-given purpose. Let's open and read their mail believing that the Holy Spirit can use it to speak to us in the uncertainty of our days.

Listen and follow along with me as I read from I Peter 2:9-10.

In the midst of uncertain times, it is important to remember who we are in God's eyes.

Seemingly remembering that Jesus had given Simon the name "Peter" and said to him that he would build His church on him, Peter picks up on the same metaphor in verse 4 and following of Chapter 2. He calls Jesus the "living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God

and precious to him.” Then Peter goes on to say “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house...”

Skipping down to verse 10, Peter remembers that once they were not a people, but now they are the people of God. Both the Jews and the Gentiles who were among the recipients of this letter were outside of the family, but God has brought them into the fold. This act of God came about by the mercy of God, not because they had somehow earned or deserved to be God’s people.

That standing with God is wonderfully stated in four names given to them. They are a “chosen people.” God has taken the initiative and picked them to be His people. Remember when you were a kid and were on the play ground and you were chosen. Or, remember when there were several people who applied for a job and you were chosen. Being chosen brings a sense of confidence and esteem, both important to those people who were being ostracized.

They are called a “royal priesthood,” meaning that all of them are called and very capable of accomplishing ministry for God, to each other and the world around them. One doesn’t have to be of the priestly family or designated or ordained. Here we have the idea of the priesthood of all believers. A deep sense of unity comes with the fact they are all able to do the work of God in the world no matter what their external circumstances might be.

They are a “holy nation,” meaning that they are a people set apart to live godly lives. They belong to God in a way that others do not. Again, a special standing that carries with it obligation.

Finally, they are “a people belonging to God” One biblical scholar writes that the “Greek phrase here conveys the sense that they are a particularly significant and precious possession to God, and therefore the object of His special care.” Being special to God made the trials and tribulations that were coming to them bearable. God cared for them and valued them even when their world didn’t.

Just as it was important to them to remember that they were a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God, so it is crucial for us to know that we have the same status or standing with God. Regardless of where you have come from, let the reality of that relationship of privilege with God seep into every pore of your being. Allow this to give you a sense of confidence, esteem, and courage as you face the rigors of life in our world.

God in His marvelous mercy has made us a people who have a responsibility to influence the world where we live day in and day out. “To whom much is given, much is required,” which brings us to Peter’s next point of emphasis.

In the midst of uncertain times, it is important to remember what God has called us to do.

Notice what Peter writes in the second part of verse 9, “That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” When we remember who we are in God’s eyes, we must always also remember that He has given us a purpose.

Houston pastor, Kirbyjon Caldwell spoke these words at a leadership conference: “There are two great moments in a person’s life: the moment you were born and the moment you realize *why* you were born.” In a general sense, Peter tells us why we were born anew in Christ and given a special place in God’s scheme for the world.

It was imperative for the people of Peter’s day to know that even though much of their lives might be outside of their control, they still had a purpose. That purpose was to declare the praises of God to their world through their deeds as well as their words. The One who had called

them out of darkness into his wonderful light wanted them to reflect the light of Christ in their world.

They reflected the light so well that it was said that they turned the world upside down. The blood of the martyrs became the seeds of the fledgling church. They so authentically reflected the light that thousands of very unlikely people were compelled to join the movement and also reflected the light.

Dear friends that is our purpose today, too. We have been called out of darkness into His wonderful light for the purpose of declaring God's praises or reflecting the light in the dark world in which we live. How well are we reflecting the light as individuals? As a church?

Listen to these words from W. H. Griffith-Thomas preached in a sermon entitled, "Knowing and Showing:"

"There are people in the world around us who never open, who never read this book (Bible). But they are reading us. Are they able to see God in our lives? Are they able to say of us to others, "That man—or that woman—reminds me of Christ? Do we let our light so shine that men may see, not us, but our Father in heaven? That is the real test."

Well-known speaker, Luci Swindoll tells about a friend of hers who "was caught in an elevator during a power failure. At first there was momentary panic as all seven strangers talked at once. Then my friend remembered the tiny flashlight he had in his pocket. When he turned it on, the fear dissipated. During the 45 minutes they were stuck together they told jokes, laughed and even sang. ...We are like that flashlight. Just as the flashlight draws power from its batteries, we draw power from Jesus. As light, we dissipate fear, bring relief, and lift spirits. We don't even have to be big to be effective. We just have to be 'on.'"

See if this prayer by John Henry Newman could be your prayer today: "Lord, shine in me and so be in me that all with whom I come in contact may know thy presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus."

I remember in my early years of ministry a song that we used to sing in the youth group. Do you remember the song, "Pass It On?"

"It only takes a spark to get a fire going.
Then soon all those around will warm up in it glowing.
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it.
You spread His love to everyone.
You want to pass it on."

A vision for SPC in 2008

As we embark upon the New Year, 2008, we, here at SPC, will be celebrating our 175th Anniversary. The committee working on the year-long festivities has selected the very appropriate theme- "175 Years In Christ Alone."

We will begin the year with a series of messages from all four of the pastors and the youth on the subject of "Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God." We will be using the revised and expanded workbook with the same name by Henry and Richard Blackaby and Claude King. I want to challenge you to get a book and study along with us even though you may have gone through it in the past. We are offering it at a reduced rate of \$15.00.

There is power in being united in any study together at the same time. I have seen God powerfully use one of the main premises of the book- If you want to know the will of God, look around and see what God is already doing and ask if He is inviting you to be a part of His activity. That's quite a different approach from asking God to bless the plans that we already have made.

This year will include some "hands-on" projects that give us opportunities to get to know each other better as different gifts within the Body of Christ are utilized. While all the details have not been worked out, we hope to build a ministry center in the city for a group serving the families of those who have been incarcerated in our states prisons. There also are plans being made to plant gardens here on our property that make this a place where people can better experience God.

There will be a special mission weekend when we bring back a couple of people who have served at SPC as mission pastors in the past. Some of our women are going to make an anniversary quilt which will be presented to the church. There will be meals, study events, and other great times of celebration.

On one of those occasions, there will be a group of people visiting us from a small church in Mercer County, Kentucky. It was people from that church who founded SPC in 1833. A group from that church helped SPC celebrate its 100th Anniversary in 1933.

This is going to be a great year when we celebrate what God has called us to be as a church. But this year must not be just a celebration of God's past faithfulness. It must be a year in which we focus on what God is calling us to do in the future to reflect His light in the dark world in which He has placed us.

One new way of reflecting the Light of Christ in the darkness of our world in 2008 came at our December Session Meeting when we approved the expansion of our school into the 7th and 8th Grade years. Along with focusing on what it means to be a Christ Follower in our world today, this middle school will have a very rigorous academic curriculum. God willing, we will start with 7th grade in the Fall of 2008. I praise God for this venture of faith!

I believe that God is calling us to be a church for others that is like a lighthouse brightly reflecting Christ's light into our immediate community. While situated within a few miles of thousands of people, I'm sorry to say that we are doing very little to reach the people right around us. We must remember who we are and reflect the light!

I believe that God also is calling us to be concerned about the crying needs of poor, hurting people who are in our city. While we recently we have begun new ministries, we have only scratched the surface as to what we could do. We must remember who we are and reflect the light!

I believe that God is calling us this year to become more involved in bringing change and renewal to our denomination. It's one thing to say that we are going to stay and make a difference and it is quite another thing to roll up our sleeves and become involved in every way possible. We must remember who we are and reflect the light!

I believe that God continues to call us to be reaching out to our nation and our world with the good news of Jesus Christ. We are called to see the world through God's eyes. We must remember who we are and reflect the light!

If we are to truly be that church for others, we must be a church that is equipping people to be God's agents in the world everyday With the Bible as our manual for living, we must give people the tools to use their God-given gifts to minister in all kinds of ways to the Body of Christ

and the world beyond these walls and this property. We must remember who we are and reflect the light!

With all of this in mind, it seems to me that we have become too comfortable and complacent. I fear that we view success as being balanced budgets and well-maintained buildings. While we know that God has a mission far greater than budgets and buildings, we have become afraid to venture forth in faith. Desiring to have enough reserves to meet whatever contingency might present itself, we are reticent to risk new ways of reflecting the light of Christ to our world. We must remember who we are and reflect the light!

Dear friends, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God. Let us be confident in and take courage in our standing as followers of Jesus Christ.

Let us remember also that we are to be declaring the praise of God who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. We must reflect the light that can push back and dissipate the darkness helping people to be whom God intended them to be and do what God intended them to do.

We must remember who we are and reflect the light!