

Hometown Exiles
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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1 Peter 1:1-12

Today we begin our 7-part sermon series on 1 Peter. Why 1 Peter? Because it is one of the best Bible books for establishing the identity of the church. 1 Peter is a book about how the church should carry itself in the world. And that's a question a lot of people are asking these days. So, as the world around us gets increasingly complicated and sometimes hostile, and as churches seem to disagree among themselves about our role in society, let's go back to the Bible, let's go to Peter's letter to get our bearings. Let's read 1 Peter 1:1-12, let's hear what it tells us about who we are and what it means to be a church in the world.

What does Peter tell us about who we are in the world? He says multiple things in this passage, but the thing that struck me was right up front in verse 2. *"To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia."* Peter calls them scattered exiles. *Parepidemois diasporas*. Sometimes those words are translated as scattered strangers, sometimes it's scattered aliens. Here it's scattered exiles.

You know what an exile is of course. An exile is someone removed from their country, displaced from their home, and living for a time in a foreign place. The Israelites were carried off to Babylon and they were forced to live there as exiles. So when Peter says, 'greetings to you scattered exiles,' we imagine him addressing people like the Israelites carried off into Babylon. But here's the weird part: the people Peter is writing to haven't been carried off anywhere. Peter tells us where these people live. They live in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia-they live in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. *And they've always lived there!* They weren't brought there from far off lands against their wills. They were born and raised in Cappadocia. They were born and raised in Bithynia. They are surrounded by people they have known their whole life! They are living in their hometown! Yet Peter calls them exiles.

This is no slip of the pen on his part. It's an image he carries throughout the letter. Later in chapter one he refers to them as foreigners: *"Live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear."* Exiles. Foreigners. Peter clearly means for them to think of themselves in this way. But how can they be exiles and strangers in their hometown? It's as if Peter were to write us and say, *'Greetings to you exiles scattered in Jenison and Fremont. Greetings to you scattered exiles of Grandville and Zeeland!'* "But Peter, We've lived here our whole life. We are comfortable here. This is our home!!" This paradox is what gives this whole sermon series its title. Hometown Exiles. Peter calls them and us hometown exiles. *Why? What's going on?*

Peter calls them exiles because Jesus has changed them. When Jesus came into their life, when they were baptized, or as the passage says 'when they were chosen according to the foreknowledge of the Father,' Jesus didn't just redecorate. When Jesus came into their life and they become a part of his church,

their life didn't just get new curtains and a fresh coat of paint, their life got a new foundation and they were completely rebuilt. When they were baptized verse 3 says they were reborn. "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has given us new birth into a living hope.*" They are not tidied up; they are new creations. New birth. New birth certificate. A new family. New life.

Peter echoes this image of rebirth two more times in the next 30 verses. 1:23-You have been *born again*, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable seed. 2:2- *Like newborn babies* crave pure spiritual milk. So not just a little bit new; completely new. In the old days, these people were just regular old pagans. They were like everyone else in their hometown. Trying to scratch out a little happiness a little security. They were trudging through what Peter calls in verse 18 their 'empty way of life.' *But then the gospel came to town*-maybe it was Paul or Silas-told them about Jesus and something inside them came to life. The Holy Spirit breathed on them and they were changed. They went down into the water of Baptism, and when they came up, they were new creatures. Everything around them was different. Even the most familiar things looked different, looked strange.

What is this like? Maybe something like this. A suburban middle schooler, a nominal Christian, goes off to a Christian camp with his best friend. And at this camp he spends two weeks surrounded by the gospel. He gets together with the guys in his cabin and he finds himself talking about the deep things of life, stuff he never talked about before. Deep feelings and fears and hopes. He hears about the love of Jesus, and he finds complete acceptance. He can be himself. He gives himself to Jesus and becomes a serious believer. But when he comes home he finds himself in the middle of the same old routines and conversations. People worried about stuff and success. People always talking about their appetites and never about their soul. He feels out of place. Like a stranger. Like an exile in his hometown.

Or maybe it feels like this: A college sophomore spends a semester in Africa doing mission and relief work. It's hard work. She sees terrible poverty and need. But she also sees amazing commitment and great joy. People have very little and yet they are so generous. She works side by side with people of all races. She learns that she can do without all sorts of luxuries and still have a full and joyful life. Then she comes back to her suburban life and her suburban church and suddenly she sees consumption and complacency all around her. She never noticed it before. It never used to make her feel uncomfortable, but now she feels like a stranger. Like an exile in her hometown. When Jesus comes into the lives of these new Christians in Asia Minor, they are completely changed. Even familiar things look different. They have a new heart, a new Lord, a new life, a new story, a new home.

Reading 1 Peter 1 and hearing him describe how belonging to Jesus changed these people so much, so much so that it made them feel like strangers in their hometowns made me reflect on my relationship to the world around me. I was lying in my bed this week before drifting off to sleep thinking about this sermon and I realized, not only do I not feel like an exile here in my home, I feel pretty comfortable. I raised my kids here. I made some good friends. I live in a great

neighborhood with wonderful neighbors who close my garage door for me when I go on vacation and leave it open. Shout out to the VanSledrights and the Scholmas. Not only do I feel comfortable here, I work at making myself feel at home. I cozify my kitchen so that I feel at home there. I added a nice fireplace so it would be *gezellig*, so that I feel at home there. I spend an hour a week cutting my lawn because I love sitting in my backyard looking over a nice, trim lawn. It makes me feel at home. I don't feel like an exile and, judging by my nesting behavior, I don't want to feel like an exile! My guess is that most of you are with me on this. Has my spirituality, has our spirituality gotten a little too cozy? Have we lost our edge?

This week, I read an analogy made by a pastor named Brandon Washington who leads a church in Denver. Pastor Washington lives in a condo complex and recently his condo board hired a tree service to trim the trees in his complex. They went around and trimmed all of the trees in the complex except for a tree right in front of his place. They left it shaggy. They wouldn't trim it. Pastor Washington went to the foreman and said, "hey why aren't you trimming my tree?!" They said it was because it was a fruit tree. They were not contracted to trim the fruit trees, and the tree in front of his house was a pear tree. Pastor Washington was confused. "It's not a pear tree! I've lived here 7 years and it's never had a single pear on it!" The tree service man said, "That's because it's a domesticated pear tree." The pear tree no longer bore fruit because it had been domesticated. All that fruit on the ground makes things too messy for some folk. It messes up suburban lawns. So the fruit bearing genes were bred out of the tree until it could stand in the middle of a suburban lawn and cause no problems whatsoever. Blends right in. Is that me? Is that us? Am I a domesticated Jesus tree?

Read Peter's letter and you know that those Christians in Cappadocia and Bithynia weren't domesticated. They bore fruit and the fruit stirred up the neighborhood. Read through 1 Peter and it's clear that they stood out so much that their neighbors were turning against them. Verse 6 suggests that they have had to suffer grief in all sorts of trials. In chapter 2 it says that they're accused of doing wrong. In chapter 3 Peter says they've been the victim of malicious speech. In chapter 4 Peter talks about the fiery ordeal that's come upon them. Commentators agree that these passages show that the neighbors are starting to turn on these Christians. Probably because they used to participate in all the pagan stuff, the parties and the sacrifices to the emperor, but now they wouldn't do that. They were disloyal to Rome! They weren't patriotic. They were bad citizens.

How bad did the hostility get? Was it just verbal insults, or was it more than that? We don't know for sure what Peter's recipients dealt with. We do know that only 50 years after Peter's letter, hostility to Christians was so strong that the governor of Bithynia (that's one of the provinces Peter is writing to!) a man named Pliny, wrote to the emperor Trajan to explain his new policy. He would stop people in the streets and ask them if they were Christians. If they said yes, "*I ask them a second time and then a third time with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them led away for execution, for...I am*

convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.” Trajan wrote back and said that he approved. Apparently the young church had so taken on the character of Christ, apparently the fragrance of Jesus was so much in them, apparently their tree had dropped so much fruit on the neighborhood that the neighbors felt threatened, and now they were hometown exiles.

I want my faith to drop enough fruit on the neighborhood that they can't help but notice. I'm not looking for persecution and fiery trials, but I do want a faith that stands out. I want that for me. I want that for the church. And that will be the focus of the rest of this sermon series. For the next 6 weeks we will look at the qualities, the characteristics, the fruit of a hometown exile. We will see the kind of life Peter held up for these first century Christians and we will reflect on how that might look for us 21st century Christians. Hopefully, Peter's words will help us become something better than domesticated trees. Hopefully, Peter's words will help us be fruitful trees in our world. But for now let me leave you with this observation. Peter writes to this church that is undergoing fiery trials and has suffered all kinds of grief. How does he address them? You might expect his letter to be full of hand wringing. You might expect his letter to be full of condolences. *'Guys, I am so sorry!! This must be so hard for you. This is so terrible and so unfair. I pray that the Lord will light a small candle of hope in your darkness.'* But is that the tone of Peter's letter?? No! In verses 3-8 Peter sends them a letter of congratulations. It sounds like they won the lottery and became first time grandparents in the same week! *"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!!!! You my friends have been filled with an inexpressible joy! You my friends have seen things that even angels would like to see!!"* They don't sound like poor, pitiful, persecuted Christians; they sound like more than conquerors. Peter does what all the New Testament writers do—they lift our eyes above the current struggle, the current fear and remind us, Jesus is risen! We have a living hope! Even when the night is dark and we are tired, our past is rooted in God, our present is sheltered and our future is secure.

So in the face of all the stuff that's bothering us, that's worrying us, in the face of all thing things that might make us say, "Oh my goodness everything is falling apart!" In the face of all these things that might fill us with an inexpressible crankiness instead of inexpressible joy, let me say to you, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given you new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has given you new birth into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. And despite everything, you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your soul."*

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