

Old Habits Die Hard
United Church of Broomfield
April 23, 2023

In the epistle – the letter we know as 1st Peter, the Apostle Peter writes to a group of exiles in Asia Minor; people ejected from their homelands for their religious beliefs - for choosing to believe in Jesus Christ, as the Messiah. As I read today's scripture, from chapter 1 verses 10-25, I want you to listen carefully and put yourself in their place. --- oppressed, rejected, in a strange land, fearful and all you have is one another and your faith in God and hope in Jesus.

1 Peter 1: (10-16) 17-23 (24-25) - The Message, inclusive

10-12 The prophets who told us [that total salvation] was coming asked a lot of questions about this gift of life God was preparing. The Messiah's Spirit let them in on some of it—that the Messiah would experience suffering, followed by glory. They clamored to know who and when. All they were told was that they were serving you, you who by orders from heaven have now heard for yourselves—through the Holy Spirit—the message of those prophecies fulfilled. Do you realize how fortunate you are? Angels would have given anything to be in on this!

13-16 So roll up your sleeves, get your head in the game, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

17 You call out to God for help and [God] helps—[God's] a good [parent] that way. But don't forget, [God's] also a responsible [parent], and won't let you get by with sloppy living.

*18-21 Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. **It cost God** plenty to get you out of that dead-end, empty-headed life you grew up in. [God] paid with Christ's sacred blood, you know. He died like an unblemished, sacrificial lamb. And this was no afterthought. Even though it has only lately—at the end of the ages—become public knowledge, God always knew [this] was going to [be done] for you. It's because of this sacrificed Messiah, whom God then raised from the dead and glorified, that you trust God, that you know you have a future in God.*

22-25 Now that you've cleaned up your lives by following the truth, love one another as if your lives depended on it. Your new life is not like your old life. Your old birth came from mortal [seed]; your new birth comes from God's living Word. Just think: a life conceived by God! That's why the prophet said,

*The old life is a grass life,
its beauty as short-lived as wildflowers;
Grass dries up, flowers wilt,
God's Word goes on and on forever.*

This is the Word that conceived the new life in you.

If I asked you, “do you know any ‘anonymous groups,’ what would you say?”

<< >>

A Google search will quickly list many of them. In fact, about 35 groups active in the United States today with titles ending with the word “Anonymous” readily came up. Some of them we recognize easily:

- AA (Alcoholics Anonymous)
- Al-Anon (for friends and families of alcoholics)
- NA (Narcotics Anonymous)
- GA (Gamblers Anonymous)
- OA (Overeaters Anonymous)

Others may surprise us:

- CLA (Clutterers Anonymous)
- FAA (Food Addicts Anonymous)
- SA (Sexaholics Anonymous)
- WA (Workaholics Anonymous).

All of these groups grew out of the recognition that it is very hard to conquer entrenched habits and lifestyles that we recognize as harmful in our lives. Millions of people have overcome serious addictions through faithful participation in these kinds of groups.

The fact is, however, that many of us, or perhaps most of us, face problems and issues in our lives for which no “Anonymous group” exists. There is a familiar phrase, “Old habits die hard,” that has been around for a long time because it rings true. It’s particularly true when we think about people who have committed their lives to God.

Peter, writing in his first letter to the “exiles of the Dispersion,” wanted to show people “living hope” that God gives them and, as a result of that hope, call them to holiness. The good news is that along with the call to holiness, Peter offers a way to get there, which is the focus of today’s scripture reading.

Peter begins his instructions by telling them, “Therefore, prepare your minds for action.” Peter realized they could not expect to easily meet the challenges of being first-generation Christians in a hostile environment. Being a Christian is a life-long commitment. And part of that commitment is knowing that we must be actively engaged in living this life. Preparing our minds for action implies several things.

- Action, so our understanding of who God is will grow as we learn;
- action, so we will be looking for ways to serve and love God and to serve and love others;
- action, so we will be on guard for the slings and arrows the enemy will throw at us;
- action, so we will be stand against the lure of familiar things that would draw us away from God. So, prepare your minds.

“So roll up your sleeves, get your head in the game,” Peter says. He compares these new believers’ situation, living among non-believers, to living in exile. They need, in that situation, to trust God and to support and trust one another. They need God and they need each other to fulfill the commands of holy living. Then, says Peter, *“...be totally ready to receive the gift that’s coming when Jesus arrives.* Keep your mind and your actions and your intentions and your hope centered fully on Jesus. Finally, he sums this part of his instructions up by this call to holiness, *“As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God’s life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, “I am holy; you be holy.”*

Next Peter says, *“You call out to God for help and [God] helps—[God’s] a good [parent] that way. But don’t forget, [God’s] also a responsible [parent], and won’t let you get by with sloppy living.*

In God there is no partiality regarding one’s deeds, so live in reverent fear. All people are the same in God’s eyes. The former Gentiles to whom Peter writes are not second-rate citizens. They did not have to become Jews first to become Christians. God does not judge any of us based on gender, race, culture, age, ability, disability, or any other way **that we** make distinctions. God sees everyone as people in need of the salvation God alone offers and provides. God sees us all as human beings standing in need of what is offered to us through Jesus Christ. There is nothing we have done or will do or can do that makes us worthy of the grace offered to us by God. But it is also true that there is nothing we have done or will do or can do that will stop God from offering Her abundant grace to us.

Peter goes on to say this in yet another way, *“Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. It cost God plenty to get you out of that dead-end, empty-headed life you grew up in. [God] paid with Christ’s sacred blood... He then lists some of the attributes of Christ and the effect that, “It’s because of this sacrificed Messiah,....that you trust God, that you know you have a future in God.*

Sometimes we just want to be told how to do something. What’s our first step? And the next step, etc. That is not what Peter writes to the early believers in the first sections of this letter. Rather, he gives general principles from which his readers should draw the appropriate ways to live a life in Christ. (We should note that as we read further in the letter, we do see some concrete examples of how to live as believers in a non-Christian world.)

So, what practical steps can get us from these general principles for holy living?

First, recognize you are living an “exile” kind of life. The old phrase, “live **IN** the world, but not **OF** the world” seems appropriate here. Peter said they once lived in “futile ways inherited from your ancestors.” So, while still living in the same place, do not fall back into your old beliefs and practices. Let Christ and his teachings guide your behavior and your beliefs.

Second, as “exiles” know that you need the strength and help that comes from being together with your fellow exiles. It’s no wonder that people who find themselves outside their native land will often find comfort and fellowship among other “expats.” When Adam was living in Poland, he often said that when he was around other expats, it made life a little bit easier. They know they need the fellowship of like-minded people and friends.

Third, live knowing you are under the protection of the resurrection of Christ. As you come to know Christ more, your trust will increase. And along with your trust, your actions and boldness for the gospel will increase as you set your faith and hope in God.

“Hi. My name is Michael, and I’m struggling to believe.”

The faith journey of a skeptic perhaps starts like that: A few timid steps toward a Christian life of holiness and faith. But the thing we know and can tell the skeptic is that God has given us help along the way, so we do not have to remain timid or anonymous.

Whether a fervent believer or a fledgling skeptic, we must also remember that God loves us. We should talk, and listen, to God every day.

Whether we feel like we're living in exile or in the promised land, we must look for ways to serve God and others every day, so that we can love one another deeply, as if our lives depend on it.

Whether in a crowded room or solitary confinement, we know that we are not alone. God is with us, and there are other believers walking with us. Seek them out. They need us as much as we need them.

Baptist Pastor Kyle Childress wrote about the need for fellow believers, *"Every Sunday for more than 20 years we have ended worship with a benediction I first learned from an African-American pastor. It begins, "Let's take each other's hands ... Now look who you're holding hands with and hold on tight! Because we're going to need each other this week." Several times over the years I've had church members in unexpected crises tell me later, "When I first heard the news, I didn't know what to do or who to call. Then it hit me — who was I holding hands with [on] Sunday? And that's who I called.... I want our people to think in terms of God and each other, each other and God — that we can't have one without the other — so much so that it is habitual, their automatic way of thinking."*¹

"Old habits die hard." It's still true, but it doesn't have to be the law in your life. Let God and other believers help you turn from the "futile ways" and walk in God's way, hand in hand with those walking with you.

AMEN

¹ Kyle Childress, "Firm in community," *Christian Century*, November 8, 2010, www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2010-11/firm-community.