

## Not From Here

### 1 Peter 1:1-12

I feel like we need to back the truck up a bit. Or a mile. We've just wrapped up our series on the book of Acts on the theme of disciples making disciples, about going out from the church into the places where we live our everyday lives and not only living as the followers of Jesus Christ but doing the work that Jesus called his disciples to do: go and tell. And all of that is good and necessary. But I feel like the one thing we failed to address, right from the very beginning, the one thing we failed to take into account was our context; where we stand in this place, at this time.

It's critical when we are reading passages of scripture that we begin by understanding the context into which that scripture was first written. In a rush to try to figure out what God is saying to us through His word, we often try to decipher or decode these sometimes cryptic, other times seemingly obvious lessons, without taking the time to hear what those words meant when they were first given. 1 Peter, the first letter from Peter was written first to Christians living in a cluster of small Roman provinces in around the year 60. We have inherited it but we were not who the letter was initially addressed to. The first recipients were likely Gentile (or non-Jewish) Christians. In the years following the resurrection of Jesus, the then small church spread from its beginnings in Jerusalem to other parts of the world, fanning out from Israel to the other nations which lined the Mediterranean Sea and also into Asia. The church which once gathered in the small upper room was now scattered throughout the world. The Roman government was not warm to the church. Nero was the Caesar or Emperor of the Roman world during these years. It was common for the Caesar to be referred to as both Savior and Lord, Caesar is Savior, Caesar is Lord. So you can understand how offensive it was to have this little Jewish rebellion group refer to Jesus as Savior and Lord, a direct act of government resistance or so it seemed. Nero, in particular, loathed Christians. So, to say that these early Christians living in Roman provinces felt in tension with the culture around them would be an understatement. These believers weren't yet facing persecution that came in the form of physical torture but the threat of it was looming on the horizon. In just a few years, Nero would tie Christians to stakes in the ground which lined the city streets, doused in oil and then lit them on fire to light the city at night. The persecution at the time the letter was written hadn't reached that level yet but it was coming. It is likely that these Christians were being watched, verbally abused and socially rejected by their neighbors. And the pressure was increasing. Peter wrote this letter to encourage the Christians living through this experience. And right from the very beginning of the letter, he reminds them who they are. To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood. Who are they: they are God's chosen ones, sanctified or set apart by the Holy Spirit to be forgiven and cleansed by Jesus for obedience to him. And at the same time, they are strangers living

in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. They belong to God but they are living in this world, living daily in tension with the culture around them.

We have lived in Georgina for almost 25 years now, almost half my life. Come to think of it, I have lived here longer than I have lived anywhere else, though we have lived in two different homes in Sutton and one in Keswick during that time. But, here's the honest truth; it's not home for me, even after all these years. You see, I'm not from here. Don't get offended. I know I am not alone – many people who live in Georgina aren't from here. But despite that, we've made a life here, raised our daughter here, bought a house here, settled in. I have learned to navigate through 5 lanes of rush hour traffic, tornado warnings, and humid summer nights with no air conditioning. Still there are niggling reminders of ways that I don't fully fit in here. I still crave donairs, if you don't know what they are you can ask me later, I don't swim in fresh water, and I have never really acclimatized to the pace of life here. And so, I do understand the underlying feeling to which Peter points in the opening lines of his letter. He is writing to people who are living in those 5 Roman provinces. They are living there but they aren't from there. That's not home for them. But unlike me, it's not that they were not born where they are now living. Most likely they were born there. But it is no longer home for them because now they know that though they live in one of the Roman provinces they are in fact, citizens of the kingdom of heaven. That's their home. Their home is with God. They are just living here in the meantime. That's what Peter is pointing to when he refers to them as God's elect, chosen children of God but strangers living in the world. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas refer to them as resident aliens<sup>1</sup> – not aliens as in ET phone home but aliens as in foreigners - living here but not really from here. We are residents of Pefferlaw, Sutton, Keswick, Newmarket, that's where we live. But we are citizens of the kingdom of God. That's home for us. And Peter reminds us that we have been chosen by God, sanctified or set apart by the Holy Spirit to be obedient to Jesus and sprinkled by his blood. You might remember that we spent a Sunday talking about the sacrificial system observed by Jews and how once a year, on the day of Atonement, the priest would offer goats as sacrifices for the sins of the people and the blood of the goat would be sprinkled around the alter to cover the sins. In the same way, Jesus became our sacrifice and his blood covers our sins. Through Jesus, we have been forgiven. That's a part of the promise. But there are two additional parts of the promise. One, that we are sanctified, literally meaning we are made holy by the Holy Spirit. What does holy mean – it means set apart from ordinary use. Sacred. Belonging to God. So, when we come faith in Christ, when we receive his gift of forgiveness for our sins, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, the Holy Spirit sets us apart for, and this is the second part of the promise: obedience to Christ. We are no longer just fumbling around in ignorance. Ignorance is bliss they say but I don't believe them. Because sometimes you don't know what you don't know. But when you come to know Christ, to experience the depth of his love and his forgiveness and his generous heart which is full of grace and compassion, then you will want to be obedient to him, no longer just following where your nose or your stomach or your passions or your wallet will take you. We are set apart for obedience to Christ. Not obedience to Nero, or whoever the current emperor might be. Not obedience to the culture in which we find ourselves living. Not obedience to our own good

judgment because we are not the most objective when it comes to judging ourselves. We are set apart for obedience to Christ. And that is surely in part, what makes us sometimes look like strangers or aliens and what puts us in tension with our culture. Because our culture is moving farther and farther away from obedience to Christ. And it didn't just start yesterday. At some point the culture turned from obedience to Christ, to referencing Christian principals, to observing Christian holidays and traditions and even that is now disintegrating. Driving past the garden centres, I am overwhelmed by the number of Buddha figurines for sale. Everyone is talking about finding their Zen, adopting the religious language of a foreign god. I wonder to myself, Do you think they would be as open to selling the cross or the crucifix as garden décor? Is that trending? Since the beginning of the spread of Christianity, we have heard or read stories of the way that Christians have been subject to persecution. And for those of us who were born in Canada and spent our whole lives here, we here those stories from a distance because religious persecution has never been a real issue for us. We have read or heard news stories of Christians now facing persecution, torture, prison simply for gathering for worship and we say, "that would never happen here" partly in disbelief but partly as a way to comfort ourselves. But here's a newsflash: being a Christian in our context is no longer hip or even common or assumed. We are already experiencing what it looks like to live in tension with the culture. One of the challenges of living the call of being disciples who make disciples is that very dynamic. We are Christians, called to being set apart for obedience to Christ, living in a culture that is moving from being warm and loving, to indifferent and increasingly contentious toward the Christian faith, sometimes with good reason. And the tensions are rising. And it would be easier to just go with the flow, to follow the swell of humanity, to say nothing, to not stand out, to be engulfed by the culture around us. That would be easier but that's not our calling. Our role is not to assimilate, to fit right in, until no one notices the difference. Our role is not to shrink back, to take cover and to hide our faith. Our role is to live as ones chosen by God and set apart from the mainstream and to be obedient not to the latest trend, not to the current Casear but to Christ, to live within the culture, to live among our neighbors and friends and to invite them into this alternative way of living, a new way of understanding who they are, children of God. We can only do that when our own faith is firmly established and nurtured, when we are living in obedience to Christ as strangers in this world, not strange, but not from here.

So the next time someone asks you where you are from, consider it a nudge from the Holy Spirit, a whisper, a reminder that you have been set apart and an invitation to live into your calling as an ambassador for Jesus.

We gather here together this morning from all the places we have been scattered during the past week: Work, family, the commute, the gym, the school, the soccer field, tim horton's But this, this is home. This is the family table and there is a place already set for each of us. This is the place where we remember who we are, whose we are. Here we are welcomed, here we are fed, here we are healed, here we are forgiven, here we are loved, here, at the father's table we can finally be our true selves. So, gather, everyone who loves Jesus. Welcome home.

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<sup>i</sup> William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, 1989.