

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Born Again to a Living Hope”
Psalm 16:1-11
I Peter 1:1-9**

**Second Sunday of Easter
April 23, 2017**

Psalm 16:1-11

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

I Epistle of Peter 1:1-9

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

“Born Again to a Living Hope”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I was reviewing the lectionary readings for this week, I noticed that throughout this season of Eastertide various readings from Peter’s Letter. It dawned on me that I have never really studied or preached on any of Peter’s Letters. Which is why I’m going to take advantage of the lectionary selections and we’ll, together, take a walk through parts of Peter’s First Letter. We’re going to do this by taking a verse-by-verse look at various chapters. So we begin, naturally, at the beginning.

When starting at the beginning of a new book of the Bible, it's usually wise to consider the authorship and occasion of said book. So, the first question to ask is, "Who is Peter?" Well, thankfully for us, Peter answers this question. He styles himself "an Apostle of Jesus Christ." The designation of apostle, or *apostolos* in the Greek, is someone who is a messenger sent forth as an envoy or ambassador. But Peter is not just any messenger of Jesus Christ. This is Simon Peter, the Rock on whom, Jesus says, the Church is built. I've heard Peter described as impetuous, which can be heard negatively, but I think it is accurate. When we read of Peter in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles, we get the sense that he is indeed given to rash and impulsive actions. It was Peter who, upon seeing Christ walking on the Sea of Galilee, cried out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."¹ And it was Peter who, when Jesus dawned a towel to wash the Disciples' feet, impiously said, "You shall never wash my feet."² Later that very night, Peter told Jesus "I will lay down my life for you," and only hours later he denied Christ three times.³ Peter had a lot of gusto about him, he was strong-willed and hard-headed, which I think made him a natural leader, someone people were attracted to, but at times could also be a challenge to work with.

Now the next important question to ask is, "Why is Peter writing?" Again, Peter answers this in the first few verses. He is addressing his letter "To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion." You have to remember that Peter is a Jewish-Christian. All first generation Christians were also Jews, which is why Peter is here mixing cultural references. He is combining the Babylonian Exile with the Roman diaspora, which was a time in history when the Roman Empire began to expel Jews from Judea. Tensions between Rome and Judah had always been high since about a century and a half before Jesus' birth. In order to release some of that tension, Rome sent legions to patrol, and by the year AD 70, the hostility grew so tense that Rome invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Jesus had predicted that event, and the Apostles' preached to early Christians to get out of Jerusalem. Peter's First Letter is said to have been written sometime between AD 60 and 68, so he is writing to those Christians who are already spreading out away from Judea. This is the reason he calls them "elect exiles" that is God's people, both Jews and Gentiles, living in dispersion and under persecution.

This persecution is the main subject of Peter's Letter. The dispersed Christians were experiencing all types of persecution throughout the Empire. Peter doesn't say for certain if these were state sanctioned persecutions. "Their sufferings were the trials common to first-century Christians, and included insults and slanderous accusations of wrongdoing. Beatings, social ostracism, sporadic mob violence, and local police action may have been involved as well."⁴ The purpose of this letter is to encourage these Christians to stand firm in the midst of these persecutions. That is, they are encouraged not to lose faith, even though they might be threatened with the loss of income, property, or even life itself. Today, there are Christians still around the world who experience persecutions like these. We are encouraged to pray for them, and if possible, to help them as we can. But I feel confident in saying that for all of us here today, we have not nor will not experience that level of persecution. So what do we do with Peter's Letter?

¹ Matthew 14:28

² John 13:8

³ John 13:37, 18:27

⁴ *Reformation Study Bible*, 2237.

How do we apply his advice to our situation and our time? Hopefully, we'll answer this question over the course of these sermons. For now, let's return to Peter's introduction.

The Apostle continues his address with "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." This is an interesting phrase to include here, and it's interesting for two reasons. What is it that is in accordance with God's foreknowledge? The Greek word translated here as "foreknowledge" is *prognosis*, and when a doctor uses this word, she is predicting the course of a disease or disorder. Likewise, here God's foreknowledge may be a prognosis of exile. God knew his people would be dispersed throughout the world, and there are challenges associated with that, especially in the first decades of the New Covenant. It might also be a prognosis of the suffering and trials that God's people would face as they dispersed into the world. Truthfully, I think it's both. I think God foreknew the Roman diaspora *and* the persecution of His children, which is why Christ sends to us the Holy Ghost and why Apostles like Peter and Paul write of suffering and trials. It is by God's Spirit and through suffering that there is "sanctification." "Note the close connection between the Father's electing love and the Spirit's work of applying redemption to the elect. This 'sanctification' includes all the Spirit's operations in setting sinners apart from sin and purifying them for God's service."⁵

This sanctification is made evident by our "obedience to Jesus Christ." Another word for sanctification is holiness. Holy things are set apart for a unique service. As Reformed Christians, we understand that perfect holiness can't be achieved in this lifetime. That's because sin still lives in us. By Christ's sacrifice on the cross, or as Peter mentions, "sprinkling with his blood," we are freed from the eternal effects of sin, namely we are saved from an eternal separation from God in Hell. The very fact of this sanctification, by way of the Holy Spirit, moves us to obey Jesus Christ. We Christians, who are two thousand years removed from Peter's intended audience, are also in a state of dispersion. We are in dispersion from our true home, which is God's heavenly kingdom. So in the meantime, while we live out our lives in this earthly kingdom, we are to live as set apart, as sanctified sinners, in obedience to Christ's commands of piety and service.

Peter then goes on to tell us how we are able to do this. He starts verse three by giving all honor and glory due to God. That in and of itself should be a model for our entire life, that everything we do, say, and think be to "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." All glory and honor is due to God because our salvation and our very existence is "according to His great mercy." As I mentioned last week, without God's first loving us, we could in no way fully and truly love one another. Just as Christ loved his Disciples, we are to love one another. Likewise, without God's first action of mercy toward us, we could in no way respond to Him in faith. Faith and Grace are intimately connected. Without one the other cannot grow in us. Faith is necessary to receive the affects of grace; Grace is necessary to receive the benefits of faith. And both are gifts from God, given "according to his great mercy."

Not only has God given to us both faith and grace, He has also "caused us to be born again." Now, I want to talk about this phrase "born again," but before I do, want to say a word about the

⁵ RSB, note 1:2, page 2242.

Greek construct of that phrase. The English Standard Version says “He has caused us to be..” in the Greek, this is a participle and it is in the aorist voice. Without going into too much detail about Greek grammar, the aorist participle is an action that has happened in the past; and this particular word, *anagennaysas*, appears in the nominative singular case. This tells us that an individual other than ourselves—because we are plural, and Peter is writing to a group of people. This other individual, that is God, has acted in the past to make us born again on our behalf. What’s interesting is this phrase “born again,” *anagennaysas*, appears only in the First Letter of Peter and nowhere else in the Bible. Although the reality and necessity of rebirth are detailed out in John 3:1-15, Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22-24, and Colossians 3:9-11. What does it mean, then, to be made into a new creation, to shed off the old way of doing things?

“It was Jesus who first declared that spiritual rebirth was an absolute necessity for entering the kingdom of God. He declared to Nicodemus, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ The word *unless* in Jesus’ teaching signals a universally necessary condition for seeing and entering the kingdom of God...Regeneration is the theological term used to describe rebirth...Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit upon those who are spiritually dead. The Spirit recreates the human heart, quickening it from spiritual death to spiritual life. Regenerate people are new creations. Where formerly they had no disposition, inclination, or desire for the things of God, now they are disposed and inclined toward God. In regeneration, God plants a desire for Himself in the human heart that otherwise would not be there.”⁶ It is important to note that being born again is not the result of faith; rather, regeneration precedes or comes before faith as the necessary condition *for* faith. You are being reborn by God, the aorist active participle, and therefore you can choose, act, cooperate, and believe in Christ. So, if you’ve ever encountered the question “Are you a born again Christian?” but weren’t really quite sure how to answer it, now you can confidently say, “Yes, I am born again because of the work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Not of my own doing, but by the love and grace of God the Father.”

The truth of the matter is, without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we could in no way be reborn, which is why the Apostle includes “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” We have this new life because Jesus purchased it for on us on the cross and delivered it to us by overcoming the grave. Beforehand, Peter mentions we are born again “to a living hope.” Here is one of the many examples of comfort the Apostle is bringing to his hearers. There is life-giving hope in our regeneration and this hope is both manifested in and overwhelms our grief. We grieve and mourn because, although we may be regenerate beings born anew in Christ, we remain citizens of a broken and sinful world. And in a broken and sinful world, we are constantly bombarded by trials and torments. What helps us through this brokenness is the knowledge that ours is a living hope, one based in Christ, a sure and certain hope of eternal glory with God. Peter describes this hope as “an inheritance,” meaning it is given to us, not by any merit we contain, but because we are adopted by Christ into the household of heaven. Our adoption as children of God means we are heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, as Paul teaches in Romans 8. And this inheritance, says Peter, “is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.”

⁶ RSB, “Rebirth” page 1857.

Our inheritance, which is our salvation, our rebirth, is imperishable. This means it cannot be consumed. It's not something that can be lost after a period of time. This was one of my biggest struggles with the church I grew up in. My pastor was saying that my inheritance was perishable, if I sinned I could lose it. Well, Peter also teaches it is undefiled, that it cannot be tainted by our sinfulness. We are all sinners and will remain sinners until we reach true and perfect holiness with God in heaven. Until that time, we are going to make mistakes, we are going to sin and rebel against God. But for the regenerate being, we have a hope that our salvation cannot be defiled. That when we sin, we must recognize it, turn to God in contrition, promise not to do it again, and receive forgiveness. This rebirth is also unfading. Our salvation is like a lamp in our inward being and it illuminates our hearts and our wills so that we can obey Christ. It never grows weak in us, although at times we may cast our gaze elsewhere, nevertheless, we know our inheritance will never diminish.

I must mention that Peter says this inheritance is “kept in heaven for you.” Our salvation is both now and not-yet. In this verse, “salvation” means “complete and final future deliverance from sin and full enjoyment of eternal glory.”⁷ We Christians live in a weird balancing act, where we exist both as regenerate children of God and as separated from God. Again, our perfect reunion with God cannot happen while we remain in these broken and fragile bodies and upon this broken and sinful world. We have a hope for something that is certain, but not yet fully seen or experienced. We have, however, received a salvation from God's just wrath and from the bondage of sin by the death and resurrection of our Lord. And Peter is right to remind us, “In this you rejoice.” We rejoice because we have been given rebirth and life-giving hope! However, along with this joy we also have anguish. Peter consoles his readers “though now for a little while,” as if the human lifetime is experienced as a brief moment in history. Although, when compared to eternity, isn't life nothing more than a blink of an eye? Nevertheless, in our lifetime, it may be necessary to experience trials. James 1:13 teaches, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one” into sinning. God does, however, allow trials for the strengthening and conditioning of our faith. Again, James teaches, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”⁸ The Apostle Paul tells the church in Rome “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts”⁹

The genuineness of our faith is revealed in the refiner's fire. A faith that “is tested by fire,” Peter says is “more precious than gold.” We all know how precious money is to us. I don't desire to be a millionaire, but I would like to pay off my student loans! If we value our faith more than we value our wealth, our reputation, or our political affiliation, we “may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” God doesn't care if you're rich or you're poor. God doesn't care if you're known as a local saint or the local drunk. And my friends, God doesn't care if you're a Republican or a Democrat. What God cares about is that we give all praise, glory, and honor to His name. And though we may be faced with trials, hardship, disease,

⁷ *RSB*, footnote 1:5, page 2242.

⁸ James 1:2-3

⁹ Romans 5:3-5

and death, if we remember that our inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, then we know we can make it through this life, and out onto the other side. And now, with ears to hear, Peter reminds us, “Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we turn to you in this season after Easter in remembrance and in celebration of the gift your Son gave to us on the cross. Although we are in Diaspora from your kingdom, we are never far from our inheritance and adoption through Jesus Christ. O God, you’ve created in us a new creation, we are born again Christians because of your gracious love for us. Thank you. Thank you for our regeneration and producing within us a faith that is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Allow this living hope to nurture us through times of trial, for though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil because your shepherding rod comforts us. Bring us through the fire of this present life so that we may be genuine in our response to faith. In the name of our risen Savior, we pray. Amen.