

Ps 2:1,2  
Hy 1  
Ps 55:1,2,9,10  
Ps 37:16  
Ps 119:4  
Hy 53:1,2,3,4  
1 Peter 5:5-11  
1 Peter 1:1-9  
1 Peter 5:10

Yarrow, June 5, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Before us this afternoon are eleven young people who wish to make profession of faith. We understand that profession to be a commitment to serve the Lord God in all of life. It's a commitment we're thankful to see in these young people – our children, grandchildren, friends, brothers and sisters in the faith.

Commitment to the Lord and His service: is that really a big thing? We're used to being Christians in Canada, and really, it's not overly hard.... O sure, we're expected to deny ourselves some of the fun others have..., but we've even gotten used to that and (truth be told) have found ways around some of those restrictions so that we can still do most things that everybody else does.... Commitment to Christ: we don't find it all that hard, really....

In the closing instruction of his letter, brothers and sisters, Peter pulls back the curtain on some spiritual realities the naked eye does not see. He speaks about attitudes his readers are to have, attitudes rooted in the reality of the devil's cunning, rooted too in the reality of God's abundant grace. As these young people today profess the faith, we do well to listen together to this instruction from the apostle.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **THE GOD OF ALL GRACE PRESERVES THOSE STRANGE TO THE WORLD.**

1. The threats to the Strangers,
2. The promise of God's Security

### ***1. The Threats to the Strangers***

You may wonder why I use the term "strangers" in today's theme. It's not a term we relate to as descriptive of ourselves. Yet with this term I *am* thinking of each of us, you young people also. We need to dare to use the term in relation to each of us because the apostle Peter used it to describe the readers of his letter. Chap 1:1: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, *strangers* in the world...." Chap 1:17: "live your lives as *strangers* here in reverent fear." Chap 2:11: "dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and *strangers* in the world...." When Peter in our text uses the word 'you' – "the God of all grace, who called *you*" – he's addressing the very same people he earlier described as "strangers".

Question. Did Peter's readers *feel* like strangers? In what way were they strangers? Why did Peter use this term to describe them? The answer to that question lies in what Peter wrote in 4:3. The

Christian has a new lifestyle. No longer does he do “what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” Because the converts to whom Peter wrote changed their lifestyle –they became ‘holy’ (1:15f), different– they stuck out as odd to the rest of the people of town. That’s 4:4: the unbelievers “think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” They called the Christians names, thought they were weird, and so ostracized them. As far as society was concerned, these Christians were oddballs, strangers, aliens, people to be suspicious of. That’s why Peter uses the word ‘strangers’ when he writes a letter to these very people.

But that, we say, was long ago. Does the term apply to us too? The answer is distinctly Yes. The more our society moves away from its Christian past, the more it embraces *this-worldliness*, the more it gives itself to the sexual licentiousness and hedonism that characterize our day, the more *strange* it finds people who refuse to give themselves to that kind of behaviour – and it treats such people as weird and out-of-step also, and somehow untrustworthy. There is –and you know it well– a distinctly *anti-Christian* bias in our land today. In this culture you, Young People, want to profess the faith. Wonderful – but be aware that Canadian society-at-large thinks you’re strange *if in fact you insist on being different, being holy*.

And that puts us squarely at the heart of our text. Peter talks about “suffering for a little while,” and in context *that’s* the suffering he’s talking about: being treated as ‘strangers’, weird. And precisely *there* is the threat to Christians: we’d rather not be strangers, don’t others to think we’re weird.... So what do I do?? Instead of being *radically* different from the people around me, I’ll be just *somewhat* different. I refuse to join in the debauchery and the lust and the drunkenness *they* do, but I can watch it on TV without a pang of guilt.... I surely can’t pursue being stinking rich as *they* want to be, but I sure can make it my goal to be a *little bit* rich.... I won’t swear the way the ungodly do, but I sure can use a *bit* of foul language. Result: we’re not seen as overly different, and that’s a lot easier.... In a word: it’s hard to be *different*, be *holy*, and the temptation is so very real to take the edges off the difference. That say you don’t suffer as much....

Peter, brothers and sisters, is keenly aware of the temptation. He’d quoted in vs 5 from Prov 3:34: “God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.” That quote, now, prompts the apostle to give the instruction of vs 6: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time.” With the phrase “God’s mighty hand” Peter recalls the reality of Jesus’ ascension into heaven and so His sovereignty over the entire world. That sovereignty includes the fact that the people for whom He died are not immediately taken out of this life and brought to glory in heaven with Him, but are left for the time being in this broken life. Recall chap 1:3ff: “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, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation ... in the last time.” What’s ahead is delightful, rich, but today it’s nothing more than an ‘inheritance’ which you haven’t yet received. In the meantime –1:6– “now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” – and that includes being called names and being denied promotions, etc. That unpleasant reality comes not by chance, but by “God’s mighty hand”. How then, says Peter, are you to *respond* to that delay in getting your inheritance? Ought you to insulate yourself from such ill treatment through adapting somewhat to the tastes and patterns of the world in which you live?

Not so, says Peter. Instead, “humble yourselves ... under God’s mighty hand.” That is: *accept* the fact that suffering, ridicule, mockery is part and parcel of the Christian life as long as you live in this

world. But, Peter adds, the day will come when God Himself will lift you up (vs 6b). That's the promise of chap 1:4: the imperishable inheritance today kept in heaven for us cannot be taken from us.

But what to do, meanwhile, with the name-calling and the sense of rejection you today experience because you insist on being different? That's vs 7: "cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." It's an instruction, we understand, to pray, to tell God of the struggles we have with being left out, the struggles we have inside ourselves with the need to be different and the temptation to *not* be different....

But what's intriguing about this verse, congregation, is the fact that Peter actually borrowed this verse from Ps 55. And yes, Ps 55 is about enemies insulting David and abusing him, calling him names. But the psalmist's mockers aren't the unbelievers at work or the pagans on the street, but the mockers are *his own friends*, his brothers-in-Israel (cf Ps 55:13f, 20). We realise so well: the closer the person is to you, the more his teasing hurts. Your own friends exert far more peer-pressure than the unknown kids across town. Those friends are the folk who are leaning on David in Ps 55, and in that setting, when the negative pressure of friends is so great, David tells himself to "cast your cares on the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall" (vs 22). And that's the very text Peter quotes in our chapter as he reflects on the pressure the Christian "strangers" experience from the unbelievers around them. That pressure can come from family members who don't know the Lord or from neighbours or friends of the past who don't know the Lord. More: that pressure to minimize being *different* can come from brothers and sisters in the flesh *and in the faith*, from kids you went to Catechism with and sat for years in the same pew, and it's when that pressure comes from brothers and sisters in the faith that we experience so greatly the temptation to give in, to take the edge off being different, to adapt ourselves to the behaviour patterns and language use and attitudes of the world around *because we don't want to suffer for being different*. Says Peter in that situation: "cast" this pressure, this "anxiety on Him because He cares for you."

Peter takes the matter a step further to remind his readers of what's going on behind the scenes. Why is it, in fact, that friends and neighbours and workmates will put pressure on you to be less holy, not be so different, that even fellow-Christians will put pressure on you to conform somewhat to the patterns of the world? Behind it all, says Peter, is "your enemy the devil".

This devil is no stranger to Peter's readers, those who know their Old Testament. This is he who was so crafty as to speak to the woman in Paradise in the guise of a serpent, and deceive her about God's identity so that through his instigation the human race fell into sin (Genesis 3:1ff). This is he who challenged God in heaven to hand Job over to the devil so that Job might be made to curse God, and the result was that Job lost all he had – and suffered greatly in the process (Job 1). This is he who "incited" David to take a census of the people, and the bitter result was that thousands in Israel died on account of David's transgression (1 Chronicles 21). This devil – the term 'devil' means "deceiver" – is *your* enemy, Peter reminds his readers, and that's to say that he'll try to do to you what he did to Eve, to Job, to David, and to so many others over the years. He's looking hard for someone to devour – and *you* are on his menu.

It's a frightening thought. I don't like being a target, let alone a victim. And what makes it more frightening is the comparison Peter uses to describe the devil's actions. The comparison is to "a roaring lion". I understand that there are two moments in a hunt when a lion may roar. The one is when the hunt is done and the lion is hunched over his victim ready to begin his feed. Since a lion lives in a pride with other lions, he roars to summon the other lions to come join him in cleaning up his victim. That's not the roar Peter refers to, if only because the lion in the text is still "looking for" someone to devour.

The other moment the lion roars is when he wants to use fright to scatter a herd of (say) antelope and then he'll go after the unfortunate beast that's separated itself from the herd.

That's the analogy Peter is thinking of here. Pressure to conform to the world, pressure not to be *too* different, can separate one from the flock, make one want to be a bit different from the rest of the oddballs (and that, of course, is the church). No, not that you want to break with the church, but to be as square and as holy as the church requires, well, that's just too awkward, draws too much criticism and scorn from the world. The urge to be *not so different*: it sounds like a roar in our ears.... So what do you do; you position away from the flock, somewhere *in between* the church and the world. Separated from the flock, scattered from the herd, somewhat worldly in conduct and attitude (though you're still in church Sunday by Sunday) – and that's exactly the one the hunting lion goes after.... We understand: that separated sheep is in far greater danger than the rest of the flock! That's Peter's warning: the desire *not to be different, not to be seen as a stranger to the world* sets one up to be a victim in the devil's hunt.

What you're to do? One can downplay the existence of the devil, can deny the fact that there's a lion out there stalking me. Pity the antelope that adopted that strategy.... You can also convince yourself that you're strong enough, fast enough, clever enough to escape the devil. Ask sinless Eve how well she handled that one.... Peter gives better instruction. "Be self-controlled and alert," he says. The terms Peter uses here describe being clear-headed and watchful. His terms stand over against the ostrich attitude of denying that there's a danger. It's simple fact, though one doesn't see it with one's naked eye, that the devil prowls around looking for prey. Says Peter: admit that fact, take it seriously, and act accordingly. Watch out for him, *don't respond to the taunting of the world by moving yourself away from the body of the saints*. Stay with the church, not just in the sense of being on the membership role and warming your pew each Sunday, but *stay with the church in your willingness to be holy*. Dare to be different from the world, despite the mocking; dare to be holy, though they call you all sorts of names. Dare to avoid every "hint of sexual immorality or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." Dare to abstain from all "obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place;" dare to give yourself to "thanksgiving" (Ephesians 5:3f).

As to Satan's efforts to separate you from the flock, his efforts to make you *less different than the world*: "resist him, standing firm in the faith" (vs 9). How can you resist the urge to scatter from the flock, the urge to look and act more worldly, less *different*? Vs 9b: remember that "your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings." It's a universal experience: Christians everywhere are seen as weird, people of strange behaviour. So don't let your suffering upset you.... *On the contrary, be encouraged by the suffering, for it spells out that you in fact are God's elect, chosen out of the world to be His people.*

That brings us to our second point:

## **2. The Promise of God's Security**

Peter's word, brothers and sisters, hasn't been overly positive – yet. But now that's described the reality of the Christian life in this fallen world, he can move on with a word of enormous encouragement for down-trodden Christians. It's the second half of our text: the "God of all grace" will, "after you have suffered a little while", "restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

"Restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." In the Greek the apostle uses a row of four verbs that together paint a delightful picture. The first one, "restore", catches the notion of fixing, making someone complete. Mark uses the word to describe what the sons of Zebedee are doing with their nets after a day's work; those nets need to be repaired as well as prepared for tomorrow's use (cf

Mark 1:19). So too the Christian, says Peter; in the midst of the bruises and damage of this life, the Lord Himself restores, repairs the Christian, yes, prepares him for tomorrow's work. Point: you're not on your own, nursing the wounds you get in the cut and thrust of ridicule isn't even your own responsibility; rather, "the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory" will "restore you", will make you sufficient for the challenges of living in this brutal world.

More, this God will "make you strong". The Lord Jesus Christ used the same word in Peter's own hearing when Jesus once told Peter that the devil wanted him for lunch. "Simon, Simon," Jesus told him, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Jesus added that He'd prayed for Simon that his faith would not fail, and then gave this instruction: "when you have turned back, *strengthen* your brothers" (vs 32). How would Peter strengthen his brothers? Our thoughts go to a word of encouragement Peter may have spoken to them. But we can just as well, congregation, think of the lesson the brethren received from seeing bold Peter fall so badly, and then seeing his tears of remorse. Stand up against the devil in his hunt for prey? No one can, even Peter couldn't.... *But despite Satan's success in clamping his deadly jaws tight around Peter, the Lord God gave him escape.* And that's so encouraging for the brethren. That's Peter's point with the second verb he uses; God will strengthen you – precisely through the pain and the trauma of the devil's hunt.

The third term Peter uses appears only here in the New Testament, but is used by other Greek writers to catch the notion of making strong, making more able. The picture is of a development in the life of the embattled Christian, a development wherein the Christian grows increasingly more comfortable in being different – comfortable because he's confident of how "the God of all grace" will protect and preserve.

Hence the last verb Peter uses. It's the same word Jesus used to when He spoke of the man who built a house, dug deep down and laid the foundation on rock (Luke 6:48). Supply a foundation: that, says Peter, is what the "God of all grace" does for you. As the house built on the rock would not fall in the storm, so the Christian is preserved by this mighty God. The temptation not to be different may be a storm in your life, and the roar of the devil as he seeks to separate you from the flock may terrify, but the God who called you to His eternal glory forms a solid foundation under you so that you do not slip or collapse.

We realize: these verbs are delightful and encouraging for the Christian who's treated as a stranger, a weirdo, an oddball. God in grace has given His Son for my salvation so that I'm heir to life eternal; will He not in Christ give me all I need in life's trials?? The promise is sure – for He doesn't change, and "to Him [belongs] the power for ever and ever," no matter the curve the devil throws at us.

You, young people, want to make profession of faith today, and you know very well what sort of culture there is around you and the temptations it throws at you not to be seen as oddballs. Can you handle those temptations? Or is the commitment too much?? It really is a question of *who do you say your God is*. He's redeemed you, He's made you heirs of life eternal. And so He will preserve and strengthen. Go forward, my young brothers and sisters, in that confidence. You will not be disappointed in Him.