

“The Missional Nature of Being in Exile”
Sermon Series *Strangers in a Strange Land*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Acts 1:1-11)

Introduction.

Have you ever heard someone say, “Back in my day when I was growing up,” which is then followed by a long list of the ways things have changed in the intervening years and young people have it so much easier nowadays than they did? While tales of walking to school 10 miles in the snow (and uphill both ways!) may be farfetched, there is no denying that life has indeed changed in some very significant ways over the last half-century. From advances in technology and medicine to seismic paradigm shifts in romance and religion, life is very different today than it was back in the 1950s when I was growing up.

I have a picture of my brothers and me taken in 1955. We’re in our cowboy outfits at Christmastime – the three amigos. I’m the little guy on the left. I also have a copy of *Life* magazine that was published in December of that same year. It has a photograph of a sculpture of a crucifix on the cover. It was a special issue on Christianity, and in the pages of this issue you can read the testimony of a devout president – Dwight Eisenhower. There is also an article about Billy Graham, resting up to save souls. There are articles about a spiritual revival at Harvard University and how churches everywhere were full of programs for the millions. There is even an article about the father of Presbyterianism, John Calvin!

In the pages of this issue of *Life* magazine are also printed some of the beautiful pieces of artwork over the centuries depicting the life of Christ – His birth, His life of teaching and miracles, His death and resurrection. Even the ads in the magazine reveal a distinctly Christian orientation. Hilton Hotels has an ad with the wise men, and the caption reads, “Wise men still seek Him.” In the 1950s Christianity was one of *the* dominant influences in our culture, and the church was at the center of society.

Now, contrast that with today. In the very popular Harry Potter novels and films, there is a famous scene in the first book and film, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, where Harry’s Uncle Vernon says, “Fine day, Sunday is,” and he explains why. It’s a day when there is no mail. The message in the film is that Sunday is actually a great day for wizardry or to begin a grand adventure, but the subtle suggestion is that it’s also a day on which no one ever gives any thought to being involved in a church or even of God for that matter. Now, I’m a fan of

Harry Potter, but I find it striking that there is no mention of God or the church or even a sense of the religious on Sunday in any of the books or films.

Sociologists have detailed over the last century the migration to the cities, the disappearance of the family farm, and the radical shift in economics in the world. We have moved from the agricultural age, through the industrial age, to the information age, and now we're in the digital age. We have also experienced profound changes in religion, and today we live in what some are calling a post-Christian, post-modern, relativistic world. Truth has come under the Big Top; it's a circus of sideshows. All opinions are up for grabs, and many people don't consider *any* truth to be absolute. Indeed, as I once read on a bumper sticker, "Truth is stranger than it used to be!"

My friend Clark Cowden says it well when he writes:

"Today the church in North America finds itself in a very different place than it used to be. Fifty years ago, the church enjoyed an honored place in our culture, and many people went to church. The church was very much at the center of public life, and church life was booming. That world no longer exists.

"It has been said that the 'church that is married to the culture of one age, becomes the widow of the culture in the next,' and we have seen that maxim come true. The church that was so effective in ministering to the 'Christendom culture' in North America fifty years ago, today finds itself struggling to relate to the culture, now that the sands have shifted. The church is like Rip Van Winkle waking up from a twenty-year nap. We are living in the same country, but it is a completely different world. We don't recognize it, and we're not sure what to do about it."¹

How are we as a church to respond in this age of Exile? In what ways might God be calling us to adapt our methods and our ministry so that the unchanging message of God's saving grace in Christ might be heard, embraced, and experienced? I believe the church must adapt and reclaim its missional identity.

I. The Missional Identity of the Church in Exile.

In the passage we've read together this morning in Acts 1, it says that after the resurrection Jesus spoke with His disciples about the kingdom of God for forty days, and He instructed them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit that would enable them to be His witnesses. When Jesus talked about the coming of His kingdom, the disciples assumed it would involve the overthrow of the Roman Empire and the restoration of Israel to a position of power in the world again. So, they asked Jesus when all this was going to happen. They were living as Exiles under the thumb of Rome, and they longed for the day when they could get back in charge and be on top again.

But Jesus told them that they were asking the wrong kind of question, and they were looking for the wrong kind of power. The power God was going to give them wasn't going to be cultural, social, or political. Instead, it would be spiritual

power, and this power of the Spirit would enable them to love, serve, and witness to the ends of the earth. In addition, rather than being solely concerned with the welfare of Israel and the re-establishment of the nation to a position of prominence and power, Jesus explained that God's concern was actually for the whole world. They were to be His witnesses not just in Jerusalem and Judea, but also in Samaria and to the very ends of the earth.

When you're living in exile like the disciples were, it's easy to feel powerless and defeated. It's natural to want to go back to a time when you and your tribe were in charge. But that may not be what God has in mind at all. I've discovered that in those seasons in my life when I've felt like I was in exile, God did some of His best work in my life. He taught me some of the most important truths of Scripture regarding what His kingdom is really all about when I felt disoriented and out of control, and I grew in my dependence on Christ in great ways. Exile can actually be a wonderful gift from God if we let it, and it can refine and grow our faith in very powerful ways.

There are three things Jesus told His disciples in this passage which I think are critical for us to hear today in this new season of Exile. First, Jesus said *wait*. "*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised*" (Acts 1:4). Waiting on God reminds us we're not in charge, and we need to depend on Him to show us what we're supposed to do. Does God have you in a waiting period right now? What is He trying to teach you in this season of waiting?

Second, Jesus said "you shall receive *power*." But the power Jesus promised is different than the power of the world. It wasn't the power of Rome or even the religious establishment in Israel. It was the power of God, and it's the power to love, the power to serve, and the power to sacrifice. That's what Jesus did. He reigned not from a throne, but from a cross. He overcame not with the sword, but with love. And His kingdom was not of this world; it's a heavenly kingdom.

The final instruction Jesus gave to His disciples was "*you shall be my witnesses*." This refers to the evangelistic mandate every follower of Christ is to undertake, and it reminds us that each of us has a responsibility to be heralds of the Good News of God's love.

A witness is someone who testifies to what he/she has seen or heard. They're not called to be an expert or an authority. They're just a witness. It's not even the job of the witness to convince the jury. That is the attorney's job. A witness is simply called to tell the truth – what they have seen, heard and experienced themselves. And it's the Holy Spirit's job to convince people of the truth of Christianity. We can leave it in His hands, and in Scripture the Holy Spirit is called the Counselor.

Jesus knew that His followers were going to be a minority voice not only in the world but even in their own city, and He tried to prepare them for living in Exile by telling them about the missional nature of their calling as His disciples. The church is to be a missional church because our God is a missional God. The Bible is an account of the missional heart of God to reach a lost and broken world with His saving love and grace through Jesus Christ. From the beginning of Genesis to the end of the book of Revelation, Scripture tells the wonderful true story of how God sent His Son to rescue fallen humanity and a broken world and to reconcile all things to Himself. And the amazing thing is that God invites you and me to join Him on this mission of love. Will you do it? Will you join Christ in being His ambassadors and heralds of the Good News and become more missional in this time of Exile?

II. The Missional Opportunity for Our Church Today.

In 1950, Lesslie Newbigin left England to become a missionary in India, and for 30 years he labored as a witness for Christ in a very non-Christian culture. When he returned to England in 1980, he was surprised to discover that now the Western church also existed in a very non-Christian society. Great changes had taken place in the 30 years he had been gone.

However, he also discovered that the church didn't have an awareness of the new situation. Public institutions and the popular culture of Europe and North America no longer held to the convictions of Christian truth, and yet the church carried on its ministry as though its values and beliefs were still shared by the great majority of people. There were still remnants of the old Christian society, but increasingly the culture had jettisoned Christian belief and practice, and the church found itself marginalized to the edges in the marketplace of ideas. Newbigin suggested that the church in Europe and North America needed to reformulate how it saw itself and how it carried on its ministry. He said the church needed to see the West as a mission field itself.

Our church supports Eric Stone and his family as missionaries in Guatemala. Eric grew up in our church, and he had his first exposure to missions when he was in high school and went to the Dominican Republic on a summer mission trip. When Eric arrived in Guatemala to begin his work as a missionary, he spent several months in language school learning to speak Spanish. He also studied the culture of the people and the history of the nation. He did all this in an effort to win them to Christ. Wayne Losey is a friend of mine who is also a missionary. He's in Asia. Once I was talking to him about being a missionary, and he said, "I become like them in 100 ways so that they might become like me in one – to know and love Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."

I would suggest to you that in order for our church to remain effective in this changing world of ours, we need to adapt and become more “missional,” while never compromising the integrity of our message of the gospel. Like Eric and Wayne, we, too, need to become missionaries – to our own communities. We need to study our culture more closely. We need to learn the language and speak in the vernacular of the people. And we need to accommodate the changes we’re experiencing all around us in order to be more effective in sharing the love of Jesus Christ in our own city in the 21st century.

Many churches today have programs of evangelism and missions. We do at First Pres. Usually, they are one program among many in the life of a local church. However, in this new challenge of being the church in a secularized society, missions and evangelism need to permeate every aspect of a congregation’s life. Missions isn’t a program we do; missional is what we’re to become.

We need to be missional in our worship, missional in our discipleship, missional in our service, and missional in the way we build community. We need to cultivate a life-style of evangelism, so that talking to someone about Jesus Christ and our love for Him becomes as natural to us as talking about our favorite basketball team. A missional church is comprised of people who are being transformed by the Holy Spirit into an outpost for the kingdom of God, a vanguard to set the captives free, and an embassy of heaven itself on foreign soil.

First Pres has a history of adapting, and it’s been a part of our spiritual DNA for many years. Back in the 1950s when Julian Lake was the senior pastor here, our church was instrumental in helping bring Young Life to town, and Dr. Lake was at the forefront of speaking into the problems of race in our city. In the 1960s we saw an influx of young people come to our church as a part of the Jesus Movement during a turbulent period in our nation’s history, and the church made room for these young people and the youth ministries of our church exploded.

In the 1970s the charismatic renewal that swept across our nation swept through Winston-Salem, and David Burr, our senior pastor, experienced a personal transformation himself when the Holy Spirit touched his life. Many of you here today remember that time and can attest to the changes Dr. Burr brought to worship and ministry. In the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s First Pres aligned itself with the church growth movement and focused on becoming an attractional church. Sundays at Sawtooth began, and we launched a worship service that targeted seekers. The Worship Center was built during that time, and it reflected an approach that tried to lean into the winds of the Holy Spirit that were blowing in that season.

We are in a different season now. And just as First Pres has adapted to the changing times of our culture in the past while never compromising the truth of the message of the gospel, we need to adapt our way of doing ministry and mission

today and become more missional. We've made the adjustments in the past, and I believe we can do it again.

Conclusion.

I believe you and I are living in one of the most unique and exciting times in all of human history with unparalleled opportunities to have an impact on the world for Christ. The world has changed, and the church is in a season of Exile. Too many churches have forgotten what their prime directive is from the Lord, and their focus has become misplaced. Archbishop William Temple offered a wonderful corrective when he said, "The church is the only organization on earth which exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members."

Where do you need to reorient your focus with regard to your missional calling? How does God want you to be an agent of transformation? What does it mean for you to become more missional? May we embrace afresh our calling in Christ as a missional church in this season of Exile. We are strangers in a strange land, but it's all for the glory of God! Amen.

¹ Clark Cowden, unpublished paper reflecting on the need for change in the Presbyterian Church USA.