

(1 Peter 1:17-2:3)

¹⁷ Since you call on a God who judges each person's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. ²² Now that you have purified yourselves by grasping the truth, you have sincere love for your brothers and sisters; love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

² ¹ Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Regard's True Blessing

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: 1 Peter 1:17-2:3

For it was not by perishable things that you were redeemed from an empty life. It was by your faith and hope in God. It was by your connection with the deep well of the Spirit. It was by escaping the hollow logic of gold and silver. It was by comprehending the lie of fame and fortune. It was by escaping fear and its flight or flight alternatives. You were redeemed from an empty life by finally resisting the seduction of the lures and attractions and promises that are but a mural of illusions. The author of First Peter says, "Live your lives as strangers here." That is, live your lives with a healthy suspicion of this world, a healthy suspicion of those things which in the world's logic seem logical enough.

This very day creation groans because too many of us have been persuaded by lies and false promises.

Seduced by greed and arrogance two of America's most respected corporations sold their souls for the extravagant wealth they intended to steal from honest Americans. And now, there reverberates through our economy, and through corporate America the fruit of that selling out. Blinded by promises of luxury and by their belief that honesty was the best policy only for underlings, Enron and Arthur Anderson executives have brought themselves and many innocent employees, shareholders and citizens to their knees.

On September 11th a group religious fanatics act on their misguided and horrifying belief that through mass murder and hatred they are doing God's will and will receive God's eternal favor. And in response, our nation claims God, also, to justify its own forms of inhumanity and to say that our violence is different, that our violence leads to peace.

The Boston Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church is but one example of religious institutions which have thought that protecting the power and privilege of the institution and its leaders was more important than protecting those the institution served. And now the Cardinal is said to have responded to one who recently addressed him by his title, "Your Eminence." The Cardinal is said to have responded, "What's left of it."

In the land we call the Holy Land blood is splattered daily on the ancient stones. A war rages. And in that war each side believes that it is right and justified, each side believes that it has no choice but to act in the way it is acting, and each side imagines that its actions will lead somewhere good. But it does not take a person who is schooled in public policy and international affairs to see that where this is leading is nowhere good at all.

O God, we have put our faith in things which are perishable. O God we need to be redeemed from the empty life which they have rendered to us. In relation to these perishable things 1 Peter is right. We are best to live as strangers from them.

But no preacher does much good if he simply offers critique, if he just decries the state of affairs and offers no help and no hope. Almost everyone who is seduced by the perishable things is trying to succeed. Very few people are trying to fail. Very few people are consciously trying to do evil. Very few people are intending to live empty lives. So, if the preacher is to be of any real help, he needs to offer more than disapproving appraisal. He needs to offer some guidance, some ideas, some concrete options.

At this point I am reminded of the true story of a U.S. senator who had a brilliant speech writer. Year after year the speech writer wrote brilliant speeches. Year after year and term after term the senator delivered them to impressed audiences and constituents, who re-elected him repeatedly. But the senator never, not once thanked the speech writer, or even so much as recognized his contribution. One day the speech writer decided to retire. He wrote his last speech for the senator. And the senator delivered it. It was a rousing oration.

The senator exclaimed, "My fellow Americans we face many problems, tough problems, both here and abroad. There is war, the economy is struggling, our youth are consumed by drugs and violence, poverty is an epidemic in too much of the world, human rights are ignored, and that doesn't mention the crisis we have created in the environment." The senator went on, feeling the vigor of the language the speech writer had crafted for him, "We politicians have not done our part to alleviate all of these important concerns and issues. And my fellow Americans, I am standing before you today to give you in detail a set of proposals to address every one of them. I am going to give you steps we need to take to solve war and poverty and drugs and the environment and all else that troubles our beautiful world."

The senator turned the page. There were no more typewritten words. The speech writer had simply left only a handwritten note, "Your on your own, buddy."

I feel like I'm a little bit out on such a limb when I declare that the preacher needs to offer more than critical commentary, that the preacher needs to offer some ideas and some options. But over these next two weeks I am going to give it a go. The stated problem is: too often we are swayed by the perishable things. The seven deadly sins will do for a start: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth. Over these next two weeks I want to think together with you how we may live as strangers from these perishable things. This week I want to start with spiritual resources and see what difference they make in how we live. Next week we will reverse the direction and start with how we live and see what difference that may make for our spiritual lives. In the end we will find a dynamic back and forth motion in which these two areas work together and ultimately become indistinguishable.

In this section of 1 Peter the author understands Jesus as the one who turned our attention toward God. ⁴²¹ "Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God." Jesus used to tell his disciples that he performed the miracles not so they would believe in miracles, but so that they would pay attention to the heart of his message. 1 Peter seems to say something quite similar here. Jesus was raised from the dead and glorified not so that we would be saved by the resurrection itself, but so that because of the resurrection we would strengthen our faith in God.

In a sense, our faith in God is the simple and straightforward answer to the problem. Is the Enron executive who lusts after luxury confident in his belief that God provides an

abundance beyond all material wealth? Not likely. Are those who are filled with hatred and vengeance trusting God to care for them and to vindicate them? Probably not. Are those who are consumed with lust or pride or envy or anger residing in the confidence that in God, not in these perishable things, is happiness to be found? I doubt it.

If the simple and straightforward spiritual answer to the problem is faith in God, getting that faith may not seem so easy a matter. After all, if it were, why are so many of us led to try the perishable things? In part the answer is that the perishable things are often glamorous and attention-getting. The devil thought he might even tempt Jesus with promises of wealth and power. In part the answer is that our fears are strong motivators. The devil's first temptation of Jesus was directed toward fear. Jesus had fasted for forty days. The devil thought sure Jesus was famished and that he would sell his soul for a loaf of bread.

The path to faith in God is not glamorous; although it is deeply fulfilling. The path to faith in God does not promise that we will avoid our fears. Quite the contrary, it promises that we will meet them fully. But there, in the valley of the shadow of death, their power will vanish.

So, how does one cultivate this faith which delivers us from the things perishable and delivers us to the fullness of life?

When Jesus joined those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, their hearts warmed when he interpreted the scriptures for them, and they comprehended who he was when they shared a meal of bread and wine together. These two activities were meant to represent the work which is done within the community of the church - interpreting the scriptures and sharing a communion meal. So, it should be no surprise to you that going to church is an important step in developing faith. Here, through preaching and Bible study, you engage and interpret the scriptures. And here you share together both the monthly holy communion and those every week communions in this community of faith. So, see, you are already on the right track. Going to church is good for you and your developing faith.

Prayer is also an important discipline for developing your faith. I think it is one of the most important. A lot of prayer begins like Janis Joplin's old song, "O Lord, won't you give me a Mercedes Benz?" That is, a lot of prayer starts as a shopping list of things we want God to do. And as we learned in a sermon a few weeks ago, this kind of prayer can create remarkable results, especially when we are praying for others and not just ourselves. But as prayer moves deeper, a shift begins to take place. The emphasis moves from asking for what we want to listening to what God is saying to us.

This shift is more monumental than at first it sounds. For ultimately I, my ego, my worried self begins to evaporate. Gregorian chant is a good example. The monks work very hard to perform the chant as well as they can. But they try hard not for recognition, or even self-satisfaction. They try hard, for their sense of self collapses into a mystical unity with God. Centering prayer, scripture meditation such as the *lectio divina* and silent meditation simply focusing your breath all also empty you from self-centered preoccupation into a space of deep listening to the voice of God. You will find resources for all of these practices on the church website.

Scripture study, the sacraments, and prayer, then, all have the effect of developing our faith and of shattering our self-centered ways. Already that breaks the devilish grip of fear and

greed and the other perishable things. It puts our faith, instead, in the imperishable, in God. 1 Peter recognizes that this faith in God we develop leads us back into the world, but not as before. The author says, “²² Now that you have purified yourselves by grasping the truth, you have sincere love for your brothers and sisters; love one another deeply, from the heart.” So here the devil’s grip is shattered altogether. For you cannot promulgate hatred and violence, when you love one another deeply from the heart. You cannot vilify or cheat your neighbor, when you love one another deeply from the heart. You cannot protect power, and abuse and neglect the powerless, when you love one another deeply from the heart.

It was not by perishable things that you were redeemed from an empty life. It was by your faith and hope in God. Continue to develop that faith that your emptiness may be replaced with fullness, and that what you do may manifest your sincere love for your brothers and sisters. And the thanks be to God. Amen.