

Foreigners and Exiles

Christ, the Church, and the Love of the Place God Has Given Us

1 Peter 2:9–12

Opening: Life from Christ

Communion reminds us that everything we ordinarily eat comes to us through death. Yet in the The Lords Table we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, the Bread of Life. He is not merely food that sustains mortal life for another day. He is the living One who gives Himself so that His people may share in His life. We are a chosen people, called out of darkness and given life from Christ Himself.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. You once were not a people, but now you are God’s people. You were shown no mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul, and maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they now malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he appears.”

1 Peter 2:9–12 NET

Peter addresses a people chosen by God and given life in Christ. To understand what it means to belong to that people, I want to begin with a recent testimony. It includes a confession, but by the Lord’s grace it also became a testimony to His faithfulness.

A Testimony of Homeland and Exile

I do not often talk about my origin. Even when people ask where I am from, I sometimes hide behind the fact that I come from two nations and now belong to a third, because I am also an American. For a long time, it was painful for me to admit that I was Albanian.

Albania is a small country just north of Greece, and it has existed alongside Greece for a very long time. On my mother’s side, my family moved to the Athens area about five hundred years ago. On my father’s side, the family moved into the regions of Albania about five hundred years ago. It was easy for me to hide behind one identity when the other felt painful.

What made being Albanian painful was the way I left. I did not leave because I wanted to. My father had already gone into exile as an immigrant in Greece for a couple of years before he returned for my mother, my brother, and me in the mid-1990s. We left because it had become almost impossible to survive. Albania had just come through communism, the regime had collapsed, and the country was in shambles.

People sometimes speak casually about communism as though it were merely an economic theory. I lived under it. In order to produce its vision of equality, it suppressed nearly every distinction and directed resources toward those in power. I did not even know I had Greek heritage until my father told me after we moved. Individual identity was treated as a threat. Families received ration coupons granting permission to buy limited amounts of food. A family might be allotted only about two pounds of meat every three months. I did not eat a banana until 1993 because they simply were not available. Nothing flourished. Everything was consumed.

I was fifteen when we left. I entered a country whose alphabet was different and whose language I did not speak, and the next morning at four o’clock I went with my father to work a sixteen-hour day. I lived as an immigrant. Greece was difficult, but Greece took me in. In that sense, Greece became the stepmother who received me, while Albania felt like the motherland that had cast me out.

For thirty years I returned to Greece many times, but I went back to Albania only twice. This time I chose to go because our elders require pastors to take sabbaticals, and I was about nine years overdue. The sabbatical

gave me enough room to consider returning to my origin and taking my son with me for his thirteenth-birthday trip with his father.

I need to confess something. I went to Albania expecting to find more reasons not to like it. I wanted justification for keeping my distance. Instead, the Lord worked in me, and I discovered that the Lord had also been working in that country. Albania was beautiful. What had happened in thirty years was remarkable. More important, the country I had left had not been abandoned by God. The missionary who led me to the Lord was still there, living almost like an exile in the land, doing good and having received favor from God. My friend Sonila, who came to Christ around the same time I did, joined a surprise breakfast that Ned had arranged. She asked me a question that oriented everything else I began thinking about: “Eris, what is your vision for Albania?”

I did not have an answer. My son and I no longer looked or moved like Albanians. I had become a foreigner in the place of my birth. I was not carrying a five-point plan for Albania’s national reawakening. The only biblical picture that came to mind was Joseph, a man taken away from his own country who nevertheless remained connected to the life of his people.

1. God Gives Us a People Before He Gives Us a Mission

One of the things Scripture teaches us is that before God gives us a mission, He gives us a people. We belong to something. In 1 Peter, language once reserved for God’s covenant relationship with Israel is now spoken over the Church: chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people of His own. No earthly nation gets to claim those titles for itself.

That matters because if we draw our ultimate identity from passing things such as countries, parties, or nations, then we place upon them a burden they cannot carry. Albania had cast me out. In that sense, I was no longer fully Albanian. But the kingdom of God, built upon Jesus Christ, still stood. The gates of Hades will not prevail against Christ’s Church.

To live as foreigners and exiles does not mean despising the country where we live. It means becoming able to steward it honestly. We look around, identify what is broken, name the sins being committed, and then love the place by doing good. We become agents of restoration rather than consumers.

That is what I saw in Albania. Through every political season, the Church remained. She stood when communism fell. She had stood through the Ottoman Empire. Every time the country passed through another season of upheaval, the Church gathered a people, did not deny their identity, but lifted that identity toward Christ and helped heal the land.

When I speak about the Church, I do not mean merely an institution, though she is one. I mean the Body of Christ, the people among whom Christ is King. Christ heals the land through His own Body.

2. Joseph: Faithful in Exile

Joseph helps us understand how foreigners and exiles are called to live. He was sold into slavery by his own brothers. He went down into the pit, then into slavery, false accusation, and prison. He descended into the lowest places. Yet throughout his life Scripture repeats that the Lord was with Joseph.

If Joseph gives me a pattern for understanding life in the diaspora, then his story tells me that God was with me even in exile. And if Peter’s language of exile belongs to all of us as the people of God in Sandpoint, Idaho, then something about Joseph’s story should also be true of us. When we suffer loss and descend into low places, yet remain faithful to the God who has promised us a homeland, He remains with us and keeps His promise.

Joseph's commitment to Egypt went very far. Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name, an Egyptian wife, and authority in the kingdom. Joseph served Egypt so faithfully that God used him to preserve many lives, including the lives of his own family. Famine came, and because God had raised Joseph to a place of governance, he became a preserving and saving agent.

"Now, do not be upset and do not be angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me ahead of you to preserve life."

Genesis 45:5 NET

That should shape our expectation as exiles in our neighborhoods, our city, our nation, and our homes. We should expect the pattern of Joseph to become a present pattern in us. We are to engage the place where God has planted us so deeply that we no longer see it as something to consume, but as something to serve. When we identify brokenness and answer it with faithful action, we may expect God to use that faithfulness to preserve and save many.

Joseph's pattern, however, pales in comparison with the pattern of Jesus. Joseph helps us recognize the Messiah when He comes. Christ is rejected and sold. He descends lower than Joseph ever could, not merely into a pit but into death itself. Then God raises Him up, and through Him life comes to the world. The world is preserved in Christ Jesus.

"As for you, you meant to harm me, but God intended it for a good purpose, so he could preserve the lives of many people, as you can see this day."

Genesis 50:20 NET

The kingdom of God does not erase our ethnicity. In the kingdom, identities formed fearfully and wonderfully in particular places are not discarded. They are raised toward glory, and the places we inhabit can also be raised and healed through our faithful presence.

3. The Church as a Visible Witness

God preserves the Church in the world so that the life of Christ may be visible to the world. Peter commands Christians to maintain good conduct among the nations so that those who accuse them may nevertheless see their good deeds and glorify God.

It was striking to be in Albania while protests were taking place every day. Thousands gathered in the capital to protest corruption and injustice. What impressed me was that when the protests ended, the people cleaned up after themselves. They proclaimed that right was right and wrong was wrong, but they did so without giving their opponents a narrative of disorder or destruction. Their good conduct strengthened their witness.

That helped me think more deeply about the homeland. The place where we are born, which we do not choose, is the soil in which we are formed and the place where we can obey the commandments to love God and love our neighbor. We should not give that away. Times become difficult, but God is faithful to His people in every generation. He saw Albania through season after season, and He will see us through the seasons of this country as well.

North Summit is not simply an organization located in Sandpoint. We are the Body of Christ placed here so that Christ's life may become visible here. Through worship, baptism, the Lord's Table, the teaching of Scripture, care for the poor, love for our neighbors, and the raising of our children, God makes His kingdom visible through ordinary obedience.

4. Three Claims upon Our Love

There are three different claimants upon our love and loyalty. The first is our homeland. The appropriate response to our country is to love it. We cannot claim to love God while refusing to love our neighbor. When Jesus is asked, "Who is my neighbor?" He points to the Samaritan, the person who is other than the people with whom we are naturally comfortable.

Our homeland is where love becomes concrete. It is not an abstraction. It consists of actual people, actual history, actual wounds, and actual obligations. We are not called to worship it, but neither are we free simply to abandon it. We are called to steward it.

The second claimant is the foreign emperor, the power that offers temporary security while reaching for our future. Albania once exchanged freedom for an ideology that promised equality and stability. Communism is an easy example because we can see that when we trust something that is not from God, it eventually asks for our children, our future, and our identity in exchange for temporary relief.

Sonila's question came in the context of Albania's political climate and the public protests. During the long flight home, I began to form an answer. I told her husband, Geni, that Albania is now flirting with exchanging its future and identity for the promises of the European Union. The EU offers economic stability and immediate benefits, but the deeper question is what must be surrendered in exchange. We have seen empires come and go. They made promises, but in the end many of them devoured us.

The biblical pattern appears in Abraham. When famine strikes, Abraham doubts God's provision and goes down to Egypt. In fear, he places Sarai, the woman through whom the promise will come, into Pharaoh's reach in exchange for temporary security and material advantage. Sarai carries the future of God's promise. Pharaoh reaches for the future.

"There was a famine in the land, so Abram went down to Egypt to stay for a while because the famine was severe. As he approached Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'Look, I know that you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you they will say, "This is his wife." Then they will kill me but will keep you alive. So tell them you are my sister so that it may go well for me because of you and my life will be spared on account of you.'"

Genesis 12:10–13 NET

That pattern should make us alert. Powers and principalities do not merely want our money or land. They go after our children, our worship, our memory, our language, and our moral imagination. Before asking what a power offers us, we must ask what it is asking us to become.

The third and highest claimant is the kingdom of God. The only truly benevolent Emperor is Christ Jesus. He is Lord of the world because He descended to the lowest place and God raised Him up, giving Him the name above every name, so that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Christ is different from every other emperor. He gives His own life so that we may have life. He calls us out of darkness, makes us a people of His own, and pours His life from generation to generation across the earth. Through His Body, the Church, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, He carries out redemptive work through small obediences: loving a neighbor, giving water to the thirsty, feeding the hungry, and visiting the prisoner. What is done for the least is received by Christ as done for Him.

5. The Glory and Healing of the Nations

At the end of this redemptive work, we discover that we get to keep our countries. They are not kept in their corruption, but neither are they erased. Revelation gives us a glimpse of the city built by God rather than man.

"By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations."

Revelation 21:24–26 ESV

“The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

Revelation 22:2 ESV

The nations walk by the light of God’s city, and their glory and honor are brought into it. That which is beautiful, good, and lovely is not discarded. It is purified and brought into eternity. The nations are neither worshiped nor erased. They are healed, purified, and offered to God.

Whatever in Albania reflects truth, beauty, courage, hospitality, sacrifice, faithfulness, and love will not be lost in Christ. It will be purified and fulfilled. The homeland wants to keep its glory for itself. The emperor wants to absorb that glory into his own. The kingdom of God heals the glory of the nations and receives it as an offering.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it. I was able to return and report that in thirty years God had been at work in Albania. He had been redeeming and glorifying what was good through His Body, the Church.

The plaster on my grandmother’s patriarchal home is older than America. It has stood for roughly four hundred years. America is young, but we should expect nothing less than the faithfulness of Jesus. When we are faithful to Him, He remains faithful to us and to the places where He has planted us. There is a future for our children and our children’s children. There is an inheritance in Christ Jesus that no external ideology can finally compromise. It is preserved by our Emperor, Christ.

This helps us understand how to live in the world without being of the world. God preserves what He redeems, including the nations. When we wonder where hope comes from, hope comes from Christ.

Conclusion: I Had Left Albania, but God Had Not

I had left Albania, but God had not. Albania had become lovely. I am not romanticizing it. We Albanians can be hard people to love. When a people has been beaten down by war after war, certain habits and wounds develop. There is still redemption needed in Albania, and there is still redemption needed in me. My own heart still needs to be softened toward the place from which I came.

But Albania became a gift to me because I was able to watch God’s faithfulness and see the faith being handed down from generation to generation.

In Berat I met a brother who showed me the city from a Christian perspective. The city is built around a mountain, and at the top stands a castle whose walls remain, with people still living inside them. He took me into that history, and I stood in a church dating to around the year 600. The Lord had been faithful to that people since the apostolic age.

“For I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in order to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem even as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”

Romans 15:18–19 NET

That church had been rebuilt again and again, perhaps thirteen times. For roughly fourteen hundred years, faithful Christians had stood there. They worshiped, sacrificed, rebuilt, and handed the faith onward. We should expect nothing less from what we are building here at North Summit. It is equally profound. Those Christians could not see every generation that would come after them, but they knew God was faithful, so they kept rebuilding.

If God can preserve that little country in the Balkans, He can preserve us. He can preserve Sandpoint through us. Therefore, we should drink deeply from the faithfulness of God. We should raise our children to love the

place where they live rather than devour and consume it. We should remember that we are being fearfully and wonderfully formed where God has planted us, and trust that He finishes what He begins.

Go, then, and be faithful.

Prayer

Lord, thank You for Your faithfulness. Thank You that faithfulness to You is simple: obeying Your Word, living ordinary lives, and raising our children to love the place where they live rather than devour and consume it.

Thank You that we are being fearfully and wonderfully fashioned where You have planted us. Thank You that You finish what You begin. Thank You for the future we have in You, and thank You for the glimpse You give us in Revelation.

May the glory of this land be sanctified by You and become part of eternity. Amen.

Small Group Discussion Guide - Foreigners and Exiles

1 Peter 2:9–12

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh... Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable...” (ESV)

1. Our First Belonging

Peter tells us who we are before he tells us what to do.

Discussion

- * Why do you think Peter begins with identity before mission?
- * What earthly identities (family, career, politics, nationality, success, failure) are you most tempted to make ultimate?
- * How does belonging to Christ change the way you see those other identities?

Key Thought: God gives us a people before He gives us a mission.

2. Living as Foreigners and Exiles

Joseph remained faithful in Egypt without forgetting the people from whom he came.

Peter calls Christians “foreigners and exiles.”

Discussion

- * In what ways do you feel “at home” in our culture?
- * In what ways do you feel like an exile?

* What does faithful engagement look like without either withdrawing from culture or becoming indistinguishable from it?

Key Thought: We belong fully to Christ, which frees us to love the world without belonging to it.

3. Loving the Place God Has Given Us

The sermon argued that our homeland is one of the primary places where we learn to love God and love our neighbor.

Discussion

* Why do you think God places people in particular families, towns, and nations rather than nowhere in particular?

* What opportunities has God given you to serve the place where He has planted you?

* What would it look like for our church to become a preserving, healing, and life-giving presence in Sandpoint?

Key Thought: We are called neither to idolize nor abandon the place God has given us, but to steward it faithfully.

Closing Reflection

Read Revelation 21:24–26 and Revelation 22:2 together.

“By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it... They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.”

“...and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

Final Question

The sermon ends with the hope that Christ does not erase the nations but heals them.

Where have you seen Christ already bringing healing—to your family, your community, or even to your own story—in a way that gives you hope for what He will complete one day?

Prayer

Pray that Christ would deepen your identity as His people, make your household a place of faithful formation, and use North Summit Church as a preserving, healing, and sanctifying presence for the life of Sandpoint and the surrounding communities.