

Proclaiming the Excellencies

I Peter 2: 9-17

**First Presbyterian Church
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The same summer we moved to Baton Rouge, our older daughter began college at a large state school in North Carolina. Having grown up as a pastor's daughter in a small town, all her life she was *known*. She had a people group. She was *seen*, maybe more than a teenager wants. People cared about what she did, certainly more than any teenager wants. But when her family moved away, the university seemed like a foreign country. She was a stranger. She lived in a huge tower of a dorm. There were people everywhere but nobody actually cared. To the college, she was a number. To her peers, she was an interchangeable piece of social acquaintances. After a year, she transferred to a smaller school. "Dad," she said, "It dawned on me that if I died in my room, nobody would notice or even think to ask until my body started stinking." That was a year in which she felt *unpeopled*. No longer a person, just a cog in the machine. Not valued for her, just another human to be consumed by the needs and wants of others.

Being "not a people" has become all too common an experience. We all know that while social media seems to connect us, on its own, it actually isolates. We feel lonelier. We feel trapped inside our own heads while it appears that somewhere people are having a great time laughing and smiling and being a group. We readily overlook that most posted photos are fake, they are just staged excitement. We also experience how the world shows us no mercy. Say the wrong thing, dis the wrong person, post the wrong opinion and we're out. Should our consumer power or attractiveness or productivity diminish, we are completely discardable. No mercy. How many people, if you could hear their hearts, would "talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness?" (Chalmers Institute). This is all the more so if you don't have the buffers and comforts than money can buy.

For Peter's audience, an astounding gift had come to them when they received the gospel. They experienced being made a new creation. They discovered they were now part of a family whose ties ran deeper than blood. In a Roman world where life was cheap, the noncitizens, the marginalized, were utterly disposable. The gods, like the stars wheeling above, were indifferent at best, hostile at worst. But now, they understood themselves as a treasured possession. They belonged to the Creator who looked at them as the apple of his eye. Their

sins had been forgiven by the sheer mercy of Christ. They were cherished and desired. And joined to all the others who had been made new creations alongside them. They were wanted for all eternity and God was at work in them not to use them but to form them for delight and glory. These no-counts, the deplorables, realized in Christ that they were now royalty, called to be priests, ambassadors, for the God who had saved them.

In this brief, powerful passage, Peter gives them the very mission statement of their lives. My first years in ministry were in Wilmington, Delaware, the headquarters of the DuPont company. The DuPont managers that went to our church were all about clear mission statements. They insisted I learn how to express the purpose of a program in a precise way. *Tell us what you're going to do and how you're going to do it. Then, above all, tell us the intended outcome. Why are you doing this? What's the point? If I look at your program and ask you 'So what,' you've got to answer clearly, 'So that!'* Now, why do you want to take the youth group on a beach trip? Uh, so that...so that we get away from the pressures of school and have fun? *Is that all?* No, so that, so that we bond as a group. *Is that all? Say it clearly!* OK, so that students can receive the gospel amidst people who love them. *There you go!* Say the purpose clearly beginning with “so that.”

Peter uses that very language. You went from being no people to being a people who belong to God. You went from being discardable to being treasured. Why? So that. “So that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.” Why did God call me to be his own? So that I could proclaim his excellencies to those who still feel lost on the discard pile! So that I could share Christ's mercy to those who feel alone in the dark. So that I could share how wonderful is Christ Jesus, how marvelous is the light that made me new and brought me home to him.

Such a glorious phrase. Such a powerful mission statement. Why do I exist? Why am I here? So that I might proclaim the excellencies of him who called me out of darkness and into his marvelous light. If you are in Christ, you have a story. A darkness to light story. In fact, you've got lots of stories. We receive Jesus once for all for salvation. But that's just the beginning. He works on us all our lives. He shines light in darkness we didn't even know we had. He uncovers stuff we kept hidden. His Spirit seeks out the cracks and crevices of our wounds. And the cracks and crevices of the habitual sins we enact to soothe our wounds. A Christian with no stories of being called out of darkness is not a Christian. Because this is the continuing dynamic of life in Christ. That is why our praises are ever fresh.

These last few months, I've been deeply immersed in the Gospel of John. We're going to start 2023 with 100 days in this glorious book. I've been struck anew by the account of the raising of Lazarus. Outside of the disciples, Lazarus was the only person called a friend of Jesus. Everyone knew that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. They were close. So it's very surprising that when Jesus got news that his friend Lazarus was ill, he did not heal him. Jesus delayed going to Lazarus. He let him die and be buried. Jesus entered the sadness of the sisters and indeed the whole village. He wept over this loss and felt deeply disturbed at the illness and death that so cruelly afflicts humanity. Only after immersion in grief did Jesus go to the tomb. There he commanded the stone to be rolled away. Martha protested, "Lord, after four days, the stench will be awful!" Nevertheless, Jesus called into the open cave, "Lazarus, come forth!" Out came the once dead man wrapped head to toe in burial cloths. The family unwrapped him and set him free to live again.

This was a unique event that occurred in real time in the real world. It was also a preview of Jesus who would die and be buried only to rise again on the third day. It is also an emblem, a picture, of what happens inside every person whom Christ calls to himself. Once upon a time, if you belong to Jesus, he said it to you. "Lazarus, come forth!" Made new, you experienced what it was like to blink your eyes in the bright light of a world restored. Alive again, you experienced the joy of others unwrapping your grave clothes and setting you free. You're up, they said gently. You don't have to go back to that cave anymore. You're with us now. We're here, and you're alive.

G.K. Chesterton wrote a poem following his own conversion. But he saw it through the eyes of Lazarus. He imagined what it was like for Lazarus. Then Chesterton entwined Lazarus with his own coming to life in Christ. Suddenly everything looked different. And everything flipped upside down. The earth itself seemed lit up with light. Ordinary paths and sights shimmered with the glory of new life. But the endless babbling of opinions and philosophies seemed so silly. Once Chesterton had lived for the game of word play and being in the know. He'd have been a prolific blogger. So he imagines Lazarus, who has been to death and returned, listening to the silly chatter of people who think they're so smart.

And all these things are less than dust to me
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.¹

My name is Lazarus, and I live! Is that not our story? I was in the cave of darkness, sealed away with a stone, wrapped in grave clothes. Cold, decaying, discarded, gone. Christ Jesus called me by name. The cave flooded with light. Nothing was the same. All those vain things that charmed me most fell away like trinkets as the burial cloths were snipped away. My name is Lazarus, and I live.

Have you written down your story recently? I should say, your stories. For this process continues. The blessed Spirit of Jesus continues to peel off the strips of cloth that marked us for dead. We were wrapped in fear, and he came with peace. We were wrapped in rage, and came with love that enabled us to forgive. We were wrapped in addictions and he came with power to set us on the long, one day at a time road to freedom. We lived in the deadly grip of greed, performance, acquisition and he made all that look silly, like less than dust. Because now we know “My name is Lazarus and I live.”

Could Lazarus describe the excellencies of his friend Jesus? You know he could. Have you written down your list of Christ’s excellencies? Might that not be a good daily morning goal? Open your New Testament and read until you see a nugget of treasure. Lift it out and write it down. See how my Jesus sparkles! The more you write it, pray it aloud, sing it, the more likely you will be to say it to someone when the time comes. “May I tell you how I was called out darkness? May I tell you how Jesus answered my loneliness? May I tell you what came to me in the midst of grief?”

This is the heart of the story. Each one who belongs to Christ can say, “My name is Lazarus and I live.” But that’s not the *end* of the story. We still live in the world. We have to fight to keep our eyes on the treasures of Christ. We have to work hard to dig down to praise and thanksgiving. It doesn’t just happen. John Calvin wrote how we need to daily dig up the promises of God through prayer. That’s intentional, steady exertion.

And, Peter tells us, we have to “abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.” In the last chapter, Peter reminded them that once they did not know any better. Don’t return to those passions of your former ignorance. Here, Peter warns his readers. Passion for wrong things still exists. In fact such fleshly passion actively seeks your undoing. Wrong desires wage war against your soul.

Now no passion every seems like an enemy. When I get mad, the passion to express that anger with biting words feels absolutely necessary. Like I’ll die if I

don't interrupt and slam. Like I will feel so satisfied if I just let it fly. Of course, that passion lies. I make a mess. I hurt others. I don't feel satisfied or happy, but miserable. A thirst for alcohol tells me that if one drink is good, four more will be better. This will get you where you want to go. How many times will I fall for that deceitful passion? We look and desire awakes so we feel moved to look some more as if that will satisfy. This could be looking at renovated homes that make you feel like your home is a dump, this could be watching TikToks where people share their self-obsessed journeys into more of themselves, it could be straight out pornography or just watching the food channel yearning for nicer counter tops and better equipment. There is a huge industry whose success depends on our believing the lie that every desire is good and must be satisfied, now, or we will never be happy. Beloved, abstain. You can say no to desire. Stop looking and desire will pass. Stop fantasizing, trying it on, giving into it in your mind. It will diminish. It may well be one day, or one hour at a time. But really, do you want to trade the relishing of the excellencies of Christ for the taste of graveclothes wrapped around your mouth?

Finally, Peter calls his readers to live out good conduct in a world where they are now weird and strange to others. Once they were not a people. Now they are new creations, part of a new heavenly race. But that means they can never go back to trying to be at home in the world. Now they are resident aliens. And they are showing forth the power and beauty of a different kind of life, lived for different reasons with different results.

The wonderful Alexander Maclaren commenting on this passage told his congregation, "People will see your life long before they hear your words. They will read you before they listen to you." How we live is our most powerful witness. Honor, respect, hard work, honesty, integrity, impartiality, kindness, mercy, fidelity, availability, hospitality. These qualities are spiritual weapons of light against the darkness. Even those who revile us for belonging to Jesus will have to acknowledge the peacefulness and fruitfulness that comes from our lives.

Beloved, grasp the heart of this word from Peter. On your own, you were no people, lost, isolated. In Christ, you are a treasured possession. You have been called out of darkness into his marvelous light. So that. So that you can now proclaim his excellencies with affection and joy. There's no going back to the cave. My name is Lazarus, and I live!

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Convert," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48211/the-convert>.