



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

**SERMON – 3RD EASTER
I PETER 1:3-9, 17-25
APRIL 23, 2023
“HOWDY STRANGER”**

How many of you were born in Wisconsin? How many in Washington, Ozaukee, Waukesha, or Milwaukee counties? How many in Brookfield, Elm-Grove, Menomonee Falls, Tosa, New Berlin? When my wife and I moved to Tanzania years ago, one of the first phrases we learned in Swahili was “umetoka wapi” – roughly translated “*where are you from?*” It wasn’t just small talk, an ice breaker - people in Tanzania were proud of their heritage, their tribe, their village of origin meant a lot to them even if they were now living somewhere else. We soon learned the term “mwenyaji” which means “a local”. You’d ask “wewe mwenyaji basi” which means “*you’re a local then?*”

Maybe you’ve lived here long enough that you consider yourself “a local” – after six years I sort of consider myself at home, but this area will never be to me what it is to you who were born and raised here. That’s just how it is. Place means something to us. There’s a saying “*you can take a girl out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the girl*”, and I can tell you with my wife that’s absolutely true.

Marcella swears the sun sets in the east around here. Put her anywhere back in McKenzie County North Dakota again and she can tell you in an instant which way you’re heading and who homesteaded the land you’d be passing if you went that way! Up there she’s “*mwenyaji*” Watch an old cowboy film and I defy you to find one that does not contain the line “*so, you new in town.*” John Wayne’s stock phrase was “*howdy pilgrim*” – his way of saying ‘*hello stranger*’.

I Peter was addressed “to strangers” – which is an odd opening to book of the bible. Amazingly, though Peter was writing as if they were his closest friends – calling them at the same time “God’s elect” – a term which meant “picked out, chosen, selected.” He wrote to Christians, mostly of Jewish origin, living in southwest Asia in modern day Turkey – people who were not from that region initially and therefore not “wenyajis” – but then again people who, as disciples of Christ, are not really “wenyajis” anywhere.

That’s crucial to understanding I Peter. We apply to it the term “pastoral epistle” because unlike the letters of Paul, they weren’t addressed to a specific audience ...Rome, Corinth, Philippi...that sort of thing. I and II Peter addresses as “stranger” anyone who called themselves Christian, including us. I’ll bet you don’t really think of yourself as a stranger in this world, do you? America is America and while there are regional accents and particularities, like what you call a hot dog covered with fried dough at a county fair, we’re all, with a few exceptions, pretty darn at home in these lower 48 of ours.

But Peter says we’re not supposed to be – he says we’re strangers. I want to talk about what that means. If you accept that we will all one day die, then you could say, like ‘them strangers’ in old westerns served up a glass of whisky by some barkeep “*yes ma’am, I’m a just passing through.*” Yes indeed, we’re all just passing through. But Peter isn’t writing about our dying so much as our living. Verse 17 says “*If you call on him as father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear through the time of your exile.*” Other translations say, “*live as strangers here in reverent fear.*”

The implication is obvious – we don’t belong here; we belong to another country and therefore another sovereign. The older I get, the stranger this world seems to me. Maybe that’s why in Philippians 3:20 Paul famously says, “*our citizenship is in heaven.*” In John 18, as Pontius Pilate desperately wanted to find a reason to release Jesus, he asked him “*where are you from?*” to which Jesus said, “*my kingdom is from another place.*” In

Tanzania he would have said *"mimi si mwenyeji"* – I'm not a local. But again, what does that mean? For our purposes today in introducing this series on I Peter, I suggest it means two things.

First, it means if we follow Christ, people who do not will at some point think us strange. To be a Christian – and by that, I mean broadly one who submits to the whole counsel of Scripture and not narrowly as someone who says, *"Jesus forgives my sins"*, you will be thought of as strange. If you are a student, be it high school or especially college, you may get push back if you express a God-centered world view on some term paper, and I can all but guarantee you'll find it harder to have a social life on weekends.

We claim a creator, trust in divine providence and grace, but during the pandemic, if I heard the phrase once I heard it a thousand times, *"trust science."* We may appreciate science, but we don't trust it – not in the way that phrase was used at least, and that makes us *"strange."* Science has an entirely different conception of what life is – it does not believe that life is purposed and sacred from the moment of conception to natural death. We are told to *"trust the marketplace"* – but the markets do not have the same conception of life that we do either. Jesus was the ultimate *"humanist"* putting people above everything. In business, people are *"target markets"* – employees *"human capital"*, the world's resources something to *"exploit"* for greater ends.

We are told to *"trust government"*. Never mind...I'm not going to get into that. Respect those who govern yes – absolutely. Peter and Paul and Jesus all tell us to respect those in authority and pray for them, but not to place our trust government, even one who claims, on their currency at least, that *"in God we trust."*

And perhaps most notably these days, we are told to *"trust ourselves."* But the Bible tells us that we are even strangers in these bodies of ours – its faculties imperfect. Paul says in II Corinthians our created bodies are *"tents"* – you can't get a better metaphor for temporary living quarters than that. Quoting Isaiah 40 our lesson says, *"all men are like grass...who wither"*. And who better than Peter, I ask you, to know what happens when you trust your instincts?

Secondly, and we'll develop this more next time, being a stranger means we need each other in this world. Peter knows firsthand what easy pickings we are to temptation and self-preservation when we're isolated. Around a fire early one morning it didn't take half an hour for him to deny his Lord three times. So, Peter tells us in this epistle all Christians are going to face their own fire – their own moment of reckoning with suffering, temptation, compromise on beliefs, morals and action.

Isolated we're more likely to mimic him around that fire in the High Priest's courtyard than if we lean heavily into fellow strangers – people who by the look in their eye, the tiny cross around their neck, or a post on their social media that says *"we're not wenyajis either."* In his book *"Life Together"*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *"it is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians – Jesus lived in the midst of his enemies."*

So, we are called, somehow, to conceive, as Paul said in I Corinthians 12 that when one part of the body suffers - all suffer. When one part rejoices, all rejoice. When one part fails, all feel that failure because one way or another we all know failure. Thus, we forgive. How strange? Yet this Peter says, is the word that was preached to you. It's a good word – because it's good news. From Peter and all the witnesses of the resurrection – I'll close today by simply saying...*'howdy stranger'*. AMEN