

Sermon for June 10, 2007

The Promising Life in a World that is Perishing

“Learning how to Live in this Post Modern World”

Text: 2 Peter 3: 14-18

Final Words

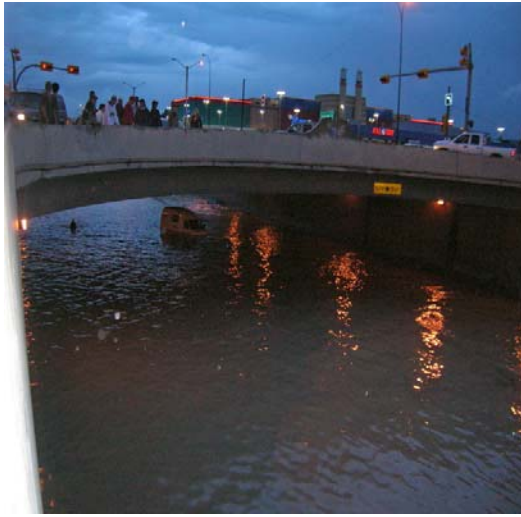
14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

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Introduction:

Did any of you suffer ill effects from last Tuesday's storm? Peggy, the children and I were all at home and although I knew that it had been a serious weather system that had moved into town that night, it was only the next day when speaking with my mother-in-law in Victoria that I realized how bad it had been.

I had not seen the news nor seen any news papers and so I had no idea that there were places in the city that had been so badly affected. One parishioner said that he was having dinner in a restaurant on Tuesday. When the storm was at its height he and his wife were just about finished their meal. It was a good thing that they were almost done, because water started to come in through the ceiling and patrons were asked to eat and run. *Long and McQuade* Music on 50th Avenue South East had more than two feet of water on the display room floor and much of their inventory was damaged as a result. And then there were road ways like McLeod and Glenmore where there was so much water that driving was hazardous, if not impossible:



There I was at home enjoying the lightening and thunder, but completely oblivious to what was happening all around me in Calgary. It took my mother-in-law, over a thousand kilometres away, to fill me in on how severe the affects of the storm had been.

My awareness, or lack thereof, of this storm is a kind of parable that represents what has happened in the Western World in the past 20 years. A massive weather system has moved in and it has changed things drastically. Now this is not literally a weather system, rather it is an ideological, philosophical, and moral system that has been affecting us for a long time. And while we may be aware of this storm, we may not be all that clear on how significant its affects have been on the way we think and live.

This system has a name. It is called Post Modernism. And as you will see this morning as we look at 2 Peter 3: 14-18, even though Peter would never have heard of the term post modernism, this passage has things to teach us about how to live as Christians in a post modern world.

So to begin, I want to say something about post modernism and then see how 2nd Peter 3 can direct us on how we are to live in a Post Modern World.

Part 1: Understanding Post Modernism

The Fine Arts have always been a helpful way to understand societal directions and trends. When it comes to post modernism the arts help us to understand this term.

I am going to show you two series of three paintings.

The first are a series of paintings are by the late 18th and early 19th Century English painter by John Constable.



In these paintings you will notice that they are coherent. Everything that you see in them belongs as part of the scene. They are what we call realistic narratives. These are scenes that depicted what life would have been like in England at the time of their composition. There is an underlying unity in these paintings that provide order and perspective.

Now I want to show you three paintings by the Belgian surrealist painter, René Magritte. He is still alive.



Every item in a Magritte painting is an item of our accustomed world, and yet nothing hangs together in the way we expect; we cannot make out what story has been, or will be, with the persons and objects represented. These paintings do not depict the situations they represent in ways that tell a coherent story. Therefore while we can name each item represented here, they are used in ways that we do not expect or even understand.

The same thing is true in music. Listen to this excerpt from the Pastoral Symphony by Beethoven. It actually has a descriptive title: "Awakening of Happy Feelings when Arriving in the Country" As you listen to these opening bars you can feel yourself in the country taking in the pastoral scene on what feels like a warm summer morning that is alive with possibility.

Compare what you have just heard with this music by John Cage. This is from a live performance called "Variations 4". As with the Magritte painting, there are sounds here that we can recognize but they are not used in narrative style. It does not make sense. There is jazz, Indian Music, engine noises, talking, broadcasting all happening in what is a haphazard and random way. This music lacks any sense of coherence.¹

I have used these examples to help you understand post modernism. Post Modernism began in the visual arts at the beginning of the 20th century and influenced music starting in the 1920s.

What was once confined to the arts is now in the mainstream of culture. For many younger people there are no longer any narratable worlds in which they live. Instead all have pieces of stories, which we can call "my story" and then there is "your story" but there is no overarching story. When this happens, life lacks coherence and meaning. It is a patchwork of this and that.

When life loses this coherence we are left with something called relativism. Relativism teaches that there are no ideas that are universally applicable to every person's life. When there is no longer an overarching narrative to help us make sense of life then we are left with a world where we can no longer speak of Truth.

¹ To listen to the excerpts go to the audio version of this sermon at staugcal.ab.ca. Click on sermons 2007 and go to the one for June 10, 2007.

Before he became Pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said in a sermon:

"We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."²

This is an apt definition of post modernism. If you were to sit down and watch any number of shows on the main and cable networks you would see that this is the theme expressed in the majority of TV series.

The flood of Post Modernism and relativism has also seeped into the Church and caused great damage actually. You will see in Anglican gatherings instances where prayers will be offered to "Mother Earth" and the worship has lost its Trinitarian focus.

When I was at our clergy conference three weeks ago I was impressed by how the younger priests spoke of their understanding of the Christian Faith through a post modern lens. Things like "I no longer think of "truth" with a capital "T" or "I read Scripture as a post modernist" were comments made repeatedly.

And yet as Christians we are followers of Jesus Christ, who in John's Gospel says things like:

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."³

There has indeed been a cascade of ideas that has resulted in our world being a place where it is hard to get our orientation. Just as the McLeod overpass does not look the same when covered with six feet of water, the same is true with this post modern world and post modern church in which we live. The claims of Jesus are so often washed away and what is left is the flotsam and jetsam of post modernism.

² *Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, in his sermon at the opening of the Papal Conclave.*

³ John 8:12 & 31-32

Thankfully as Christians we can turn to 2nd Peter 3.14-18. He is able to help us clear away that flotsam and jetsam so that we can say there are absolutes even in the relative western world of 2007.

Part 2: Peter's Word to Christians living in a post modern world⁴

At the centre of what Peter says to us this morning is the call placed on our own life. All around us the culture might be saying and doing one thing. At verse 14 Peter says that we are to live in such a way that the promise of the 2nd Coming is spurring us on to grow in living lives a holiness. We are to be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

Peter understands very well the kind of world in which we live. He sees that it has a way of spoiling and corrupting people. But for the Christian, Peter also understands that we can so live in this world that we are not infected by the world's corrosive influence. To be found without spot or blemish is of course something we can never attain in this life. Yet, it is our desire to say that we do not want to be squeezed into the world's mode but rather we want to be transformed by the renewal of our minds.⁵

Peter shows us here three ways in which our minds can be renewed.

1. It is through understanding the present from God's perspective
2. Living in the Present with God's word
3. Growing in the present in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

1. Understanding the Present from God's Perspective

At verse 15 Peter writes:

"And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him."

⁴ I am grateful to John Piper and his sermon: GROW IN GRACE AND IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LORD: <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper82/062082m.htm>

⁵ Paraphrase of J. B. Philip's translation of Romans 12:2

Verse 15 is God's word on how to interpret the time in which we live. The history of the world between the first and second coming of Christ is, above all, an age of salvation. One thing marks this time as utterly unique and it is more important than the renaissance of classical learning, the emergence of science, the rise of industry: namely, it is the time of salvation. The Savior has come and opened the way to God. While he forbears, the way is still open. When he comes the way will be closed and the time of salvation will be past.

From the perspective of eternity we will look back on these brief 2,000 years or so, and the relative conditions of human life from the Dark Ages to the age of moon-landing to sophisticated BlackBerries will be utterly insignificant in comparison to the all-important distinguishing mark of this period between the first and second comings of Christ -- this was the time when people could be saved by trusting Christ. A well know preacher named John Piper has observed of this age of salvation:

The only history of eternal significance is the history of missions and its off-shoots in sound doctrine and holy living. The only biographies that will be cherished in the age to come are the lives of the saints -- the people who knew that these were times for salvation. Let's be a people who key off of God and see the times in which we live from his perspective. "Count the patience of the Lord as salvation."⁶

2 Living in the Present with God's word

It is only when we understand the present from God's perspective that we will be motivated and inspired to live in the present with God's word. In speaking of Paul's letters, Peter says in verse 16:

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

When Peter lumps Paul's letters together with "the other scriptures", we gain an insight which is of terrific importance. Jesus himself viewed the Old Testament scriptures as fully authoritative and binding when properly interpreted and applied (Mt. 5: 17). They were the word of

⁶ Growing in Grace and the Knowledge of the Lord at:
<http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper82/062082m.htm>.

God (cf. Mark 7:13). Peter taught in 1:20 and 21 that prophetic scripture (and I think he would include all of the Old Testament) was inspired by God as people were moved by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when he puts Paul's letters in this same category, he is, I believe, claiming an equal inspiration and authority for Paul. He confirms what Paul claimed for himself. Paul said of his own teaching in 1 Corinthians 2:13 "We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit."

This is why the Bible stands at the center of Christian life. For we believe the Bible is the inspired word of God -- that it stands before us as our guide and over us as our judge, and under us as the rock of our hope.

The Psalter begins with an affirmation of the centrality of this Scripture when it declares in Psalm 1, verse 1:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.

The apostles are united with each other and with the Old Testament in one great inspired book of God. The more you read it the more you will see with the eyes of God.

And yet we need to be careful when we read this book. There are those false teachers who will take the Scriptures and distort them to their own destruction.

Another way to put this is that the interpretation of Scripture is a matter of life and death. James said:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.

Why? Because the eternal destiny of the people hangs on how they interpret the Scripture.

It is the "untaught" and the "unstable" who are prone to twist Scripture and be destroyed. These are the ones in 2:14 whom the false teachers were able to sweep off their feet. And 2 Peter is written to help us not be like that.

It is through understanding the present from God's perspective, by living in the present with God's word that we can be:

3. Growing in the present in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

At verses 17 and 18 Peter tells us how we can be growing in the present. He writes:

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Here is the antidote to deception and destruction. It is growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The contrast between verses 17 and 18 is between, on the one hand, a tree which does not grow and so loses its stability in the earth and is blown over by a wind of false teaching and dies, and, on the other hand (v. 18), a tree which keeps its roots planted in God's grace and so grows and stays healthy and stable and does not get blown over by false teaching.

If you can remember 6 weeks ago when we began this series on 2 Peter, I pointed out that the letter begins and ends on the same note of grace and knowledge. I want you to see that again now and how it sums up the main point of the letter. Verse 18 says,

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Verse 2 of Chapter One says,

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Though the language is somewhat different, it seems to me the point is the same. Peter's great desire for these people and for us is that we might experience lots and lots of God's grace; that we might suck it up through our roots and grow by it; that we might soak it in like sunshine through our leaves and grow by it.

After "Jesus" there is no sweeter word in all the Bible than "grace." It's the greatest unused resource in all the world. It is the wealth of God's kindness, the riches of his mercy; the soothing ointment of his forgiveness; the free and undeserved, but lavishly offered hope of eternal life. Grace is what we crave when we are guilt-laden. Grace is

what we must have when we come to die. Grace is our only ray of hope when the future darkens over with storm clouds of fear.

And how shall we receive this grace? Where shall we send our roots down? To what sunshine shall we turn up our leaves? To the promises given to us when the Master bought us by his death (2:1). The best fertilizer for our hope and godliness is the knowledge of our future in God's grace. So Peter says, "May grace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God," and closes with the command to grow "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord."

To quote John Piper one more time:

If we but knew a fraction of the future God is making for us; if we could begin to feel that all our deepest longings will be satisfied, that every beauty of this world will be preserved and heightened; that every good affection will soar; that every proper relationship will be restored forever; that all pain and frustration and ugliness will vanish; that the fish will bite before the worm hits the water and Jesus will fill the world with golden light -- if we could believe what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9), our hearts would be freed from the greed and fears that cause us to sin. We would escape from the corruption that is in the world and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

Conclusion:

Yes beloved the times they are a changing. Post Modernism and relativism will be with us for a while yet. In such a world it is good to know that 2nd Peter shows us that we can live as thoughtful Christians in such a world through understanding the present from God's perspective, by living in the present with God's word so that we can be growing in the present in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The message of 2 Peter is that the joy of hope is the power of godliness. The knowledge of God's promises is the pathway of his power.⁷ And the promises, the power, the hope and the godliness are all because of his grace. And so the book ends -- and with these words we take our leave: "To him be glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."

⁷ 2 Peter 1:2-3

