

Acts 2:14, 36-41
4/30/17—Easter 3A

Psalm 116:1, 3a, 4-9, 14, 19
I Peter 1:17-23

Far Off?

Have you ever traveled a great distance? Have you ever been outside the United States, or visited a faraway state? If so, did you stay there for an extended period of time? If you did, at first you may have longed for home. But maybe later you became acclimated to that place and you grew more comfortable with its customs. Maybe you began to forget what home was like. Maybe you even started to speak the language or picked up the accent of the locals.

You know, that's how it is for all the people listening to Peter in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. They're in Jerusalem, the epicenter of the faith of Israel. The city of their ancestors. But these dispersed Jews are from nations all over the known first-century world. They're from far away. Far off.

But they've come together in this place. And they're hearing the message of a bold and gifted preacher. Peter knows that his hearers have been far away. But not only far away geographically. Far away spiritually! So Peter doesn't hesitate. He tells that crowd—just as an angel told frightened shepherds

in fields near Bethlehem—that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. Jesus is Christ, the Lord.

This Jesus whom you crucified. Peter states it unequivocally. Now he knows that none of his listeners actually wielded the hammers and drove the spikes. Just as you and I did not physically hang Jesus on the cross. Peter didn't, either. He wasn't there. He fled. He put distance between himself and his Lord. Jesus was crucified because we human creatures have put distance between ourselves and our God.

We are the ones who have opened the vast chasm that has lain between ourselves and our Creator. We opened it, but we could not close it. This great gulf could be bridged only by the One who came to reach out and to reconcile and to bring us back from the faraway place to which we had wandered off.

And when we hear who this One is, that he is both Lord and Christ, and when we hear what our willful actions have done to him, we are—like Peter's listeners—cut to the heart. This is the “so what?” part of Peter's sermon and of the one you're hearing today. This is the point at which—stricken and humbled—we ask the very question posed by that crowd in Jerusalem.

What should we do?

What should we do? Isn't this the question at the center of our search for life's meaning and purpose? Doesn't asking it define the point at which we relinquish the bravado and the self-reliance and the need to control? Aren't these words the touchstone of our willingness to no longer keep our distance? To no longer remain in a far-off place?

What should we do? is not a difficult question. Its answer isn't shrouded in mystery. Preacher Peter tells us plainly: *Repent and be baptized.*

Be baptized. The baptismal font is where the distance we have kept begins to shrink. Baptism is where our journey back begins. But baptism isn't something *we* do. It's something *God* does. It's God's perfect act. That's why you and I are baptized only once.

Baptism is a holy covenant. For our side of the covenant, solemn vows are taken. Vows that shape how we are to live each day for the rest of our lives. As one who has been baptized, you have vowed to *renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, [and] reject the evil powers of this world.* As one who has been baptized, you have vowed to *resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.* As one

who has been baptized, you have vowed to *confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord.*

As one who has been baptized, you are no longer alone in the world. You have been made part of a community—a community of faith. You belong to a community of love. As one who has been baptized, you are nurtured in that faith and in that love. [As Maddie and Grant are today.] As one who has been baptized, you are incorporated into the household of God. [As Maddie and Grant are today.] As one who has been baptized, you are a cherished member of God’s family. [As Maddie and Grant are today.] As one who has been baptized, God claims you. [As God claims Maddie and Grant today.]

Being baptized is one part of Peter’s answer to the Jerusalem crowd’s question: *What should we do?* The other part of Peter’s answer is *Repent.*

Now repentance isn’t something that comes naturally to you and me. Repentance has been defined as “a...change of mind.” Repentance is also a change of heart. And repentance is a change of orientation. Repentance is change! And change is not

easy for us. We resist change—sometimes with everything that’s in us.

But repentance is what you and I are to do as followers of Jesus. In the Scriptures, the word that gets translated *repentance* actually means *turning*. Repentance is a turning away from every power and every idol and every ideology in this world that stand against and are in conflict with the radical values of the kingdom of God.

My brothers and sisters, repentance doesn’t happen overnight. Repentance isn’t something we do just once, but again and again. Repentance is something we have to *keep* doing. For you and me, repentance is a process. Because we have been far off.

And according to Peter, we who have been far off have been offered a promise. God who has promised is faithful. This God calls *everyone* to Godself. But, tragically, not everyone will respond.

God called to the first man. But he and the first woman had been disobedient, and so they hid themselves in the garden and kept their distance from God.

God called to Jonah. But Jonah did not want to do what God wanted him to do. And so Jonah took off in the opposite direction. Jonah put distance between himself and God.

God called to a younger son who—in Jesus’ story—took off for a far country and there squandered his father’s property. He put distance between himself and his father. But, touched by the measureless grace that always precedes repentance, he had a change of heart and returned—to be welcomed with a love that can only be called prodigal.

Hugh Reed shares the story of another son.

“Allan (not his real name) came to me at my...church... wanting to be baptized. He was a child (or victim) of the “me decade” and [had] felt compelled to leave home and family to find himself and, of course, lost himself, becoming a stranger to himself and the world, wandering the streets of [a faraway city] trapped in a world of drugs. One night he managed to get off the street for a night in one of the shelters. He crashed into the bunk, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the groans, and trying not to be overcome by the odors of the strangers in the bunks around him. He didn’t know where he was, he didn’t know who he was,

but he wanted it to be over with and he considered how he might take his own life.

He was shaken out of these thoughts when someone came in and called out a name from another world.

‘Is Allan Roberts here?’

That had been his name once but he hadn’t heard it for some time. He hardly knew Allan Roberts anymore. It couldn’t be him being called.

The caller persisted, ‘Is there anybody named Allan Roberts here?’

No one else answered and so Allan took a risk. ‘I’m Allan Roberts (or used to be).’

‘Your mother’s on the phone.’

‘My mother, no, you’ve made a mistake. I don’t know where I am; how could my mother know where I am?’

‘If you’re Allan Roberts, your mother’s on the phone.’

Unsure what to expect, he went to the desk in the hall and took the receiver. ‘Allan,’ it was his mother, ‘It’s time for you to come home.’

‘Mom, I don’t know where I am, I have no money, you don’t know what I’m like anymore. I can’t go home.’

‘It’s time for you to come home. There’s a Salvation Army officer who’s coming to you with a plane ticket. He’s going to take you to the airport to get you home.’

She hadn’t known where he was, she just called every shelter and hostel for months until she found him.

He went home and, supported and loved by his mother, who had never ceased to know him even though he had forgotten himself, and influenced and inspired by the faith that had sustained his mother’s hope and love, he began attending church services and one day came to my office seeking to be baptized.

He did not find his own way to my office . . . A path, not of his own making, [was] made by the love that found him, that knew him better than he knew himself...”

Allan was far-off no longer. God called him to Godself and offered him the promise. Allan called on God and so received the promise—the promise of blessings that save.

The promise of forgiveness. Peter, who denied Jesus, was forgiven. Everything you have ever done has been forgiven. You are forgiven!

And you have received the promise of the gift of God's own Spirit. The Holy Spirit who converts and convicts and counsels. The Holy Spirit who gives you the words you are to speak, to share the good news of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit who empowered Peter and empowers you with courage to open yourself, that God may use you to accomplish God's mighty purposes. That God may speak through you in calling to those who are still far off.

Beloved, you are no longer far off. For your feet have been set on a path that is leading you to the place you long for more than any other. By the One whose love is calling you home.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.