

Session 8: Strangers and Exiles

Introduction

“The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ reframes everything, bringing hope, life, and meaning to every part of human culture. And yet many of us can't see how our faith shapes much of everyday life and experience.”¹

“Sunday to Sunday, the in-between days, where was Jesus?”²

“I didn't think about the whole of who I am, what was I passionate about, or how God uniquely made me.”³

“What are God's purposes for us? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? How do we live in the world but not of the world?”⁴

“God wants to make us more ourselves.”⁵

“He is holding all things together and that he is reconciling all things to himself.”⁶

“We're exploring: How does the biblical story reframe our story?”⁷

“We live out of our stories.”⁸

“So be located in the story, the biblical story in which God reveals himself, his character, and his life.”⁹

¹ Mark Mayhew, Marketplace Institute, Regent College. (Mark is one of the main presenters of this Series.)

² Hugo Ciro, CEO of Level Ground Trading, Victoria, BC.

³ Christine Lee Buccholz, Consultant and Board Member, Restavek Foundation, Falls Church, Virginia.

⁴ Mark Mayhew.

⁵ Hans Boersma, Professor of Theology, Regent College.

⁶ Amy Sherman, Author, *Kingdom Calling*, Senior Fellow, Sagamore Institute.

⁷ Mark Mayhew.

⁸ Rikk Watts, Professor of New Testament, Regent College.

⁹ Sarah Williams, Professor of History, Regent College.

“At the beginning of Reframe, we asked the question, how do we live out the gospel in every aspect of our lives in the modern world?”¹⁰

“To answer that question, we used the metaphor of a journey and the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus drew alongside them and retold them the story and opened their eyes.

“We can only know who we are and what we are to do if we know what story we're in. If Christians don't know the biblical story, we can easily be shaped by the stories of our culture and the patterns of the world.

“Over the last five episodes, we've been exploring the big chapters of the biblical story. This is the story that reframes our vision of God, ourselves, and God's purposes for the world. So, if this is the big story, how do we live it out? How do we engage the world in our generation?

“In episode two, we talked about the risk of being shaped by the culture. But there's another equally dangerous risk: withdrawing from culture altogether.”¹¹

*Fran VanderPol's Story*¹²

We've always lived within our church community very much, especially for myself, because I was teaching in Christian schools and at home with my family, and then when I started to work in the business and get to know other people there, you branch out more, but you're still thinking along the line of Christians, right? You find other Christian businesspeople and other Christians. You find the Christians in your neighbourhood or whatever, wherever you are, and that's who you build relationships with.

“Fran VanderPol and her husband Peter have lived in Abbotsford, Canada for over 30 years. Like most cities today, Abbotsford is increasingly diverse and multicultural.”¹³

¹⁰ Erin Antosh, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture. (Erin is one of the main presenters of this series.)

¹¹ Mark Mayhew and Erin Antosh.

¹² Fran VanderPol, Teacher and Small Business Owner, Abbotsford, B.C.

¹³ Mark Mayhew.

We have three Sikh temples in our city. We also have Hindu temples. We have Muslims and all kinds of different people here, which makes it a really interesting city because we have over a hundred churches within our population of 135,000 people. So that's significant. A few years back, we were also known as the murder capital, which wasn't a very nice name. 2007/2008, when there was a lot of gang wars going on, I think everyone was just really shocked to see so many of our young people dying needlessly.

“Fran began to feel uneasy about the isolation of her Christian community.”¹⁴

I went to this prayer breakfast and the mayor put out a challenge, and he said, 'You know, Abbotsford, we have many, many churches here, and we're the most generous city in Canada, and yet, we have many people out on our streets, we have many people living in poverty. There's so much that needs to be done, but you churches are keeping your money within your walls and you're doing your own programs and you're doing them very well, but don't forget about the rest of us here in the city.' And that really hit home to me because I was thinking, 'Yes, we build our own little community, and we don't even really think about the others.' I never really stopped to ask the question, how is God working in your world? What is he opening up for you? I actually have a painting (hanging on the wall there) in one of these big gothic cathedrals in Europe and crowds of people in the shadows admiring the architecture. And then there's one window where the light is shining in, and there is an old man and a young child that are actually going up to look out the window. And I, I love that painting because I think it's so symbolic of how we live. We're living within the walls of our cathedrals.

“We've seen the danger of being conformed to the world and of living behind the walls of our cathedral. How do we lift the story out? This is the question we'll be exploring in this episode.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Mark Mayhew.

¹⁵ Erin Antosh and Mark Mayhew.

2 Corinthians 5:17 – 20

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us.

“We began this course with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, two disciples whose hearts burned and whose eyes were opened. And in this session, I'm going to begin by taking us forward in time from that moment.”¹⁶

Jesus has appeared to all the disciples. He'd ascended, and now, some years later, the disciples find themselves plunged into a different world. The embryonic Church is under internal pressure. A wide variety of multicultural congregations create a really complex church environment. Heresy is knocking at the door. To make matters worse, the Roman authorities are both disdainful and increasingly violent towards the Christians.

This is an arc of human experience with which we're familiar, isn't it? Many of us come to faith, our hearts burning. Everything changed as we see Jesus. But then, as we try to work out our faith in life, we encounter difficulties:

- fellow Christians let us down,
- we feel misunderstood by the church,
- we're confused by theological debate and the division of faith from secular life,
- perhaps we're wounded by the impact of false doctrine, false teachers,
- we find that many people around us despise Christianity,
- we're under pressure in our workplaces and we struggle to see what role our faith has to play there, maybe some of us even lose our jobs or fail to get a job because of our beliefs.

¹⁶ Paul Williams, Executive Director, Marketplace Institute, Regent College. (Paul is the main speaker for this session.)

Assimilate or Withdraw

So, the excitement of our encounter with the resurrected Jesus fades away. We feel alienated, misfits, strangers in our culture. And faced with that alienation, frustration, and disappointment, we become vulnerable to those two temptations we talked about in the very first session:

1. The temptation to assimilate, to become indistinguishable from the surrounding culture, to take on its values and assumptions, effectively give up on this very difficult identity of being Jesus' followers, or
2. the temptation to withdraw, retreat into a comfortable Christian ghetto removed from the challenges of the world, hoping somehow to hold the sin of the world at bay as if it's not inside us also, often reacting with anger and resentment at every step our society makes away from the world of the Bible.

But neither of these options will enable us to be faithful witnesses of Jesus. Neither will help us be a blessing to the world, a foretaste of his kingdom. But how do we avoid them? How do we live in the context of so much pressure on our identity as Christ's followers?

Fortunately, this experience of alienation is something that the New Testament writers understand very well. Jesus himself told us to expect it. 'In this world, you'll have trouble,' Jesus tells us. 'But take heart! I've overcome the world,' he continues. (John 16:33) The apostle Peter puts it like this in his first letter, 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia...' (1 Peter 1:1) Los Angeles, New York, London, Shanghai, Sydney, Nairobi, Santiago. And then he goes on, in chapter two, 'Dear friends, I urge you, as strangers and exiles, abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.' (1 Peter 2:11-12) Peter understands that the church is in exile, scattered amongst the pagans. It's in exile from its true home, from the fullness of the kingdom that it yearns to see.

The apostle Paul adds to this picture in chapter one of his letter to the Philippians. 'Whatever happens,' he says, 'as citizens of heaven, live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.' (Philippians 1:27) We have this sense of

exile, not simply because we're scattered amongst the world, but also because our true citizenship is in heaven. We're not primarily British, American, Chinese, Korean, Kiwi, Kenyan, Brazilian, nor are we primarily pastors, businesspeople, professionals, homemakers, farmers, or factory workers. No, we're fundamentally citizens of the Kingdom of God. Our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ, and this makes us foreigners and strangers in a world that's turned its back on God.

But notice that neither of these New Testament writers leave it at that. They're not content simply to explain and validate the feeling of exile amongst believers, as important as that is. Rather, both of them go on to urge the church that this very sense of exile is a reason for doing good, for blessing the world as God's image bearers, for being agents of reconciliation, promoting right relatedness with God, each other, and creation.

You see, there are two very different ways of being a foreigner in a strange land. You can be a foreigner and understand yourself as an alien. You can resent all the differences between the culture you're in and the one where you belong. You can feel permanently isolated, trapped, almost like a captive in a foreign land. Alternatively, you can be an ambassador. An ambassador is still a foreigner, they still might miss home, but they're not resentful, they don't feel trapped. They know they're living in a strange land on purpose. They've been sent there. They have a job to do, and they can expect all the help from their home country that they need.

Ambassadors

This is the image that the Apostle Paul uses to reframe the experience of exile into a core, to enter into God's mission in the world. In 2 Corinthians 5 (10-20), he writes, 'God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us.'

This is the ministry and posture of the church in the world, to function as Christ's ambassadors, to make God's appeal to the world. This commissioning to be ambassadors restores the original commission given to human beings in the Garden of Eden. To be God's regents in the world, those who represent the authority of another, and to be God's priests in the world, those who mediate

relationships, who engage in diplomacy. What a huge contrast to the experience of being an alien, even though both are strangers in a foreign land.

“Part of engaging with the whole world is us saying that true maturity is not just about retreat, it's about engagement. Jesus models a completely radical approach to holiness. Jesus spends time with sinners, and it's not that he's compromised, they are transformed. We are supposed to be transforming. If Christians retreat from the world of business or the world of art or the world of politics, and those vacuums are filled, and they're filled by things that are not necessarily going to bring glory to God or transform our culture for the good. The glory of the gospel is that we are supposed to be salt and light, bringing transformation and change.”¹⁷

“Jesus does two things with his initial band of disciples that I think say a lot about how we should participate in our pluralistic world. He calls them and he sends them. I think this rhythm of calling and gathering and sending and scattering is the model for Christian discipleship and influence. If we're just scattered, we will become assimilated, inevitably, to the culture around us. It's too powerful and all-encompassing. If we're just gathered, we will become irrelevant and invisible, actually, to the culture around us. So, if we're to be ambassadors of Christ in the world, we've got to be gathered so that we're formed in His image. But then we have to go out, not alone, but not just gathered and huddled together.”¹⁸

“I think the time has arrived when we need to see all of us as people of God sent out for mission in our particular callings. For example, a journalist is a very influential person. Why did he write the papers, shapes the thinking of the world. And if they cannot be there when they are Christians, or the people are religious, with their faith there, then it's very easy to mislead the world and cause problems. When, if you are a farmer, you do it as if you are tilling the ground, because God has assigned you that work. If you are a member of Parliament,

¹⁷ Krish Kandiah, President, London School of Theology, Founder, Home for Good.

¹⁸ Andy Crouch, Author, *Culture Making*, Executive Editor, *Christianity Today*.

the way you debate in the Parliament, and the bills that you pass, should reflect those values in your vocation as a Christian.”¹⁹

So, I wonder which is closer to your experience of exile? Living as an alien? Living as an ambassador? If you're anything like me, the honest answer is probably a mixture of the two. But how can things change? How can we live more fully as Christ's ambassadors today? To help answer that question. I want us to take a look at the biblical story of Daniel.

Daniel was a Jew in exile in Babylon, forced to work for a pagan empire. Ever feel like you're forced to work in a pagan culture? That was Daniel's experience. Think about the situation from Daniel's perspective for a minute. He'd been trained and schooled to serve God in the sacred city of Jerusalem. After Nebuchadnezzar's armies have reduced his career prospects to rubble, he's taken captive, transported to Babylon, told to serve this pagan king. How easy it would have been for him to give up on his identity, assimilate into Babylonian culture. He had to learn the Babylonian language. He had to learn all about the Babylonian gods. He had to master their astrology. He was told to eat their food. He was called by a Babylonian name. He was forcefully enculturated. At the same time, his fellow Jews down at the river, by the waters of Babylon, are weeping and wailing about the fall of Jerusalem. They are struggling with the temptation to withdraw. They're full of anger. They want God to smash the Babylonian babies against the rocks. What did they make of Daniel and his friends, do you think?

This picture, I suggest, is full of analogies to our own time. Often, isn't it when we are scattered throughout society, working in our various occupations that we find the temptation to assimilate the strongest? Isn't it when we're gathered together, comforted by one another, telling the stories of Zion, that we're most tempted to withdraw from the world? I think we can face both of these temptations simultaneously, find that the Church scattered, and the Church gathered are increasingly at odds and suspicious of one another.

¹⁹ Eliud Wabukala, Archbishop of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya.

So, how can the model of our ambassador help us? What can we learn from Daniel and the Jewish exiles about ambassadorship?

Embassy

Perhaps the most obvious thing that we associate with an ambassador is the embassy, a community of diplomats organised to support the diplomatic mission of the home country in a foreign land.

Now, a few years back, I was in Washington, D.C. and I decided to go and visit the British Embassy there. I'd been living in North America for a while, and to be honest with you, I was feeling a bit homesick. (You feel sorry for me?) It was incredibly heartening to arrive at the embassy and find a large statue of Winston Churchill. Beneath his outstretched foot, there's a line along the sidewalk (or the pavement, depending on where you learned your English) and on Churchill's side of the line were the words, United Kingdom, and on the other side, it read, United States. Here was a real piece of home. Inside, the décor, the furnishings, were elegant, welcoming, classically English, at least to my mind, designed for comfort, conversation, conviviality. You could totally imagine a cup of tea and cucumber sandwiches at 4:00 on the veranda, before settling some important matter of state or, perhaps, getting your passport renewed. But alas, this was not to be my experience. The embassy was closed to visitors, and I left somewhat forlorn.

Now, setting up an embassy is primarily about creating a place of community that nurtures, resources, and communicates the identity of the home country. It's a kind of home from home. And this is what we find God telling the Jewish exiles to do in Babylon. Jeremiah 29 contains a copy of a letter from the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles. In it, God rebukes the false prophets who were cursing the Babylonians and prophesying imminent judgement on them. When we are in that place of withdrawal, just as when we are in that place of temptation to assimilate, there will be prophetic voices calling us further into the temptation. God tells the people not to listen to them. Instead of withdrawing in resentment and anger, God tells them to settle down, make home, be fruitful in exile. Moreover, they're to 'seek the peace and welfare of the city to which I've carried you,' says the Lord. 'Pray to the Lord for it.' Isn't that phenomenal? What an incredible attitude that God is calling forth from them. They've just seen their homeland, their entire future from their perspective, decimated by this empire.

They've been taken captive and now they're being told to bless it. Not to adopt a posture of imprisonment, but rather one where God's life can still flow through them, God's kingdom can still come through them. Yes, there's a promise that God will eventually gather the exiles home. But for now, they're to do what Israel was always meant to do, be a blessing to the nations, be agents of peace and reconciliation.

Similarly, we find Daniel, from the outset of the story, with his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He doesn't function alone. But rather, together, he and his friends form a prayer group, a support group, a place of community in which the culture and ethos of their faith in Israel's God can be sustained amidst the pressures of life in Babylon. It's a place where they maintain communication with their true home in prayer, a place from which they acknowledge and declare God's ultimate sovereignty. And a place where they receive from God the resources of wisdom and strength that they need to do his work.

Daniel had thought he would serve God in the sacred city of Jerusalem, but he knows that God is still king in Babylon, even if Jerusalem's in ruins. He can stand in his identity as God's servant because he's confident in God's character and power. This is no local deity, this is the God of the whole earth.

Are we confident that God is as much king in our workplace, our home, our community, as he is in the church? Is there a line of Christ's sovereignty running around the outside of everything we do and influence? Do we trust God out there, in the world, as much as we trust him in here, in the church? If so, we'll be able to do what Daniel and his friends did. Even though they were obviously alien captives, they hold to their identity as God's ambassadors, God's servants, messengers in the Babylonian court. And ultimately, they see God's deliverance and transforming power in remarkable ways in their own, very pagan workplace.

The Church

The primary embassy for us as Christians today is, of course, the local church. The New Testament word for *church* is *ecclesia*. It's a word borrowed by the New Testament writers from the realm of politics and government. It refers to a gathering of citizens to form a political council. Just as Caesar might call together an *ecclesia* to make decisions, God has called together a gathering of

citizens of His kingdom to exercise spiritual authority. The local church is absolutely at the centre of God's purposes in the world.

Like other embassies today, the British Embassy in Washington is the sovereign territory of the United Kingdom. It's a place that nurtures and resources the British diplomatic mission to the United States, but it's also a place that, in its very character and ethos, projects and communicates something of the values and culture of the United Kingdom. The church is meant to be the same -- not English, but Kingdom of God. When people come into our midst, they should encounter something of the culture of the Kingdom of God, something that gives them a foretaste of heaven. Welcome, hospitality, friendship are central to this. Unlike the British Embassy in Washington, the church is not supposed to be closed to visitors. Let me put that another way, the church is not simply a place where we talk, prepare, strategize about mission. It's an embodiment of God's mission. New Testament scholar Tom Wright puts it like this: 'The task of the church is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second.'

“I was given the opportunity, here in New York, to help a church create an entire program to help equip its people to be ambassadors for Christ. Very few people working in finance knew someone else who worked in finance, or doctor knew another doctor who was a Christian. And so, we got groups together. As they started to be able to challenge each other on idols, how they had sort of brought in the storyline of a secular profession as opposed to a Christian storyline. So, only talking to another person in your field, can you really start to challenge each other on those kinds of things. When we're working with each professional group at Redeemer, we ask each of them to say, What do you think was God's purpose for your profession? What was the purpose of your health care profession? What was the purpose of the education profession? If God cares about all those things, he has a purpose for it in the world. And only after you've gotten a good sense of the purpose of it, can you say then, what's broken, where have we really lost our way, and how can you then be part of redeeming that?”²⁰

²⁰ Katherine Leary Alsdorf, Founder, Center for Faith & Work, Redeemer Church, NYC.

“I think that we as pastors rarely value or affirm the integrity of what other people are doing Monday through Saturday. I really do believe that the whole world is God's kingdom, and I felt like I should put my money where my mouth is. So, I spent three years working for Apple Computer after seminary, and there were days I'd make 90 phone calls, or be on the phone four, five, six hours a day trying to create deals. You're trying to... you're facing rejection again and again and again. It's really healthy now, to have been a pastor, knowing what that's like. I have a much better appreciation on a Sunday morning for what people are going to do. I fully believe that what you go to do is as important as what I'm going to do. That the difference about what I do is gifting, not hierarchy of value. So, I spend a lot of time going to people to have lunches with them, so they know where they are is where the church is.”²¹

“To me, the Sermon on the Mount is very instructive because, what does Christ say? You have heard it said, but I tell you. That should be our approach. There's what society says, what everybody does, the common practice, but Christ is always telling us, no matter what your calling, you could be in insurance, in banking, a farmer, you could be making furniture, you could be in IT, there's always, in your particular sector and calling, a way in which Christ says, 'But I tell you.' So, he is raising you to a higher level and saying, 'This, however, is how I want you to reframe and re-engage.’”²²

“The role of the apostles, the prophets, the teachers, the evangelists, is to equip God's people for works of service. And I tell people when you come to serve as an usher at our church, what you're really learning is how to be a servant leader, what you're really learning is the attitude of the mind of Christ that you will then take out to your workplace. God is definitely doing something in this part of the world, because the church is growing fast, and people have real faith. I think the danger, then, I see, is that if the church doesn't understand its cultural mandate in that way, then it becomes a passing wave. So, what's the use of the church, what is the use of these Christians, if their country is just as corrupt as any other country, if the poor are just us unlooked after us in any other country?”²³

²¹ Dean Miller, Pastor, Falls Church, Virginia.

²² Cosma Gatere, Business Consultant, Nairobi, Kenya.

²³ Muriithi Wanjau, Pastor, Mavuno Church, Nairobi, Kenya.

There's one important way in which the church is not at all like modern embassies. Every local expression of the Church, all over the world, is also the residence of the king of kings. Every individual believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit. If I'd managed to get into the British Embassy that day in Washington, there's not much chance I'd have met Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the second. But if someone wanders into our local church community, or engages us in our workplaces and neighbourhoods, they can encounter the living Lord Jesus Christ.

Coming together humbly under his Lordship is how we sustain our identity under pressure in all the multiple places that we've been scattered by God for mission in the world. It's also how we're resourced for mission amongst the gathered community of the local church, and it's how we're empowered to love one another, work together so that God's presence truly is made manifest in our lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me ask: Where are you experiencing exile? Are you part of a church community that nurtures your identity in Christ and communicates the culture of God's kingdom? Where has God placed you as an ambassador?

Fran VanderPol's Story cont'd

“Five years ago, Fran VanderPol was challenged, as a Christian, to engage her community at a critical time in its history.”²⁴

When we were the murder capital in that dark time in our history, when it was often high school students that were being murdered, and so, the school board started to realise that we needed to do way more as far as building good character within our children, but they couldn't do it on their own. It needed to be a whole community.

“Fran joined with others to start up a community initiative called *The City of Character*.”²⁵

²⁴ Mark Mayhew.

²⁵ Mark Mayhew.

The City of Character initiative is designed to unite the city with a common language, which is our language of character, and to get each of us constantly thinking about what good character looks like, in whatever we're doing, whether it's our personal lives, or how we run our business, or how we live in our classrooms. We debated on what good character really looked like in our city, and we ended up with six words that we all agreed to: that's respect, responsibility, integrity, empathy, courage, and service. So, that's become our language.

We try and work grassroots by providing, maybe, materials, or ideas, inspiration. There are a number of schools of character, and it's actually just fascinating to watch the kids take off with this because they really get it.

The biggest thing that I have learned in this, is that if we're going to get outside of our walls, the first thing we need to do is change our vocabulary, because when we use church language, we're not heard by the people, then, that shuts them down. And I really had to struggle with that because my first guilt feeling was, are you denying Christ by not actually using his name? But then I thought, we all want to have strong families, have a safe community to live in, and we all have the same problems and the same issues and the same hopes and dreams.

Genesis -- we are created in God's image, God placed His image within each person. And now I don't look at them as someone to bring to God, but look at them as someone where God is already working and we can join together with that.

“In this episode, we've been exploring how we can live out our faith today without being shaped by culture, but also without withdrawing from culture. So, where has God placed you? How can you be an ambassador for him? In the next episode will be looking at how to do more of this ambassadorial work, reframing the situations in which God has places us.”²⁶

²⁶ Mark Mayhew and Erin Antosh.