

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** 1 Peter :17-23 (New International Version)

*<sup>17</sup> Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. <sup>18</sup> For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. <sup>20</sup> He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. <sup>21</sup> Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

*<sup>22</sup> Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. <sup>23</sup> For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

Sally says to Charlie Brown, "We have to write a short piece for school that expresses our personal philosophy. So far, I've written, 'Who cares?' and 'Forget it.'" Charlie Brown says, "How about 'Why me?'" Sally says, "That's a good one, I'll fit it in."

If you were asked to write a short piece that expresses your personal philosophy on life, what would you write? What little quips are expressions of principles in how you feel about life? What experiences and influences are the forces that have shaped your attitudes and values on life?

Our philosophy on life directs our attention towards those things that support it. It guides the choices we make. We exert energy, sometimes tirelessly, into efforts that then shape who we become. The result of our beliefs, choices and efforts may provide us with a life full of substance, something that provides meaning and support for our lives. Without something that gives substance to our lives, we are left with chasing endlessly merely a lifestyle, that may or may not bring gratification temporarily, but lacks the power to sustain us when life demands more from us. Let's face it, when suffering enters the picture of our lives, we need something of substance in our lives to encourage us, something to hold onto to get us through our struggle and pain.

The bible teaches us that the substance we need in our lives is found and grown as we place our faithfulness in God and are obedient to God's will. Jesus provides us with the perfect example to inspire us as we work at these efforts. Although he was God's Son, his was not always an easy life. Having left his Father's side, to live among us as one of us, he knew the challenges and sufferings of this life firsthand.

Yet because of his relationship with God, Jesus had purpose, inner peace and joy to sustain him throughout his ministry. And when his life was so brutally ended, he still held on to his Heavenly Father, because he knew that in the end death would not win, he would live again, eventually, returning to his Father to live there for eternity. Believers in Christ know that the same is promised for all of those who follow Jesus. Like Jesus, we can have a substance-filled spirit, who will carry us and sustain us as we journey through the highs and lows of our lives.

On the other hand, putting all of our efforts into building a particular lifestyle that doesn't involve one's faithfulness and obedience to God, leaves one vulnerable to sin, which is deceptive. It appeals to our senses and wants, but is only a temporary fix. Those who generally live to acquire a particular lifestyle, without meaningful substance to build it up, are left with emptiness and insecurity when that lifestyle is threatened or, worse yet, falls apart.

The corpse flower (titan arum), native to the equatorial forests of Sumatra, can grow up to ten feet tall. Once open, the spiky, bright red bloom looks like rotten meat, a veritable welcome mat for the insects that pollinate it – flies and carrion beetles.

According to Matthew Opel, University of Connecticut research assistant, the corpse flower “looks like something has died. It smells like something has died. It has chemicals that dead bodies produce.”

The flower, which begins to disintegrate after two days, is nothing but a big practical joke to the flies and other carrion insects, says Opel. “Unlike other plants that offer nectar, there’s no real reward here. They think they’re going to get a meal because it smells like something dead.”

How like the corpse flower is the story of sin. It is attractive. It holds out promises yet has no true rewards. And it ends in death.

The verses read to us this morning in Peter challenge us to consider whether we are seeking a substance-filled life; or settling for merely an acceptable and comfortable lifestyle. It matters. It makes a big difference in our lives.

We understand why this is important as we look at those who first received Peter’s letter. His letter was written for first century Christians who were suffering and being abused and persecuted for believing in and obeying Jesus. The suffering started in Jerusalem at the hands of their Jewish brothers, and it spread to the rest of the world. It peaked when Rome decided to rid the empire of these Christ followers who would not bow to Caesar. The people were under a lot of pressure to give up their faith.

Peter understood what they were facing. He was persecuted. He had been beaten and jailed and threatened many times. He lived with nightmares after seeing other Christians lose their lives. He was troubled as he saw the church scattered. But he knew Christ, and nothing could shake his confidence in the risen Lord. So, Peter’s letter was meant as encouragement to the faithful church, offering comfort and hope, and urging continued loyalty to Christ.

Peter begins by appealing to what they already knew. They recognized God as their Heavenly Father, believing him to be a caring and loving Father; whom they faithfully called on in prayer regularly. At the same time, he calls on them to have a “reverent fear.” A reverent fear involves having a healthy respect for the all-powerful God. God who is Judge over all the earth and therefore should not be ignored or treated casually

Later, he reminds them, reminding us at the same time, that this all-powerful God, is a personal God too. In verse 20, as Peter describes Jesus’ existence with him before he sent him to live among us, we hear the message in Peter’s words that even at that time, God loved us, yes, long before we were born, we were precious to God, which is why he had a plan even then to save us all. God knew his beloved children would rebel and fall into sin, so he had a plan ready to save them. Peter makes it clear that Jesus’ death on the cross was not a last-ditch effort by God to draw his people back to him. It was a plan put in place before creation. God always has and always will want to be known by those he created.

Peters shares these points because he knew these all were very important points to remember if the people expected to have the substance within them to give them hope and to persevere through their suffering. He knew the risk was high that they might return to old empty practices that would not sustain them. There had always been beliefs in gods, but usually they were felt to be distant gods, never really involved with people of the earth.

The gods they once worshiped were lifeless idols with nothing to give. Peter reminded the believers, he reminds us, that the One true God is different. He made himself known, he is personal, so personal that he came to earth through his only Son, Jesus. We have a Living God who is involved in our personal lives.

Without the awareness of God's involvement in our lives, made real as we seek him and as we choose to make our relationship with him a priority in our lives, we are left with nothing but a void, or a pit of hopelessness to fall into when our lives get messy. Happy are those who fall into the arms of God when they struggle.

How unfortunate are those who refuse to believe, but rather turn to superficial remedies to comfort them; like materialism, physical satisfaction, empty, short-term pleasures with no lasting meaning or peace. These are merely idols. Peter blasts the idea that these things have any value in saving us. Let us not forget that God didn't use gold and silver, lifeless material prizes, to redeem us. We are much more valuable than these. Only the most valuable treasure was offered for our redemption. We were saved by the shedding of the precious blood of Jesus, God's own Son. I have to ask then, why then would anyone think these earthly things will save us from their troubles now?

Peter's message also discourages the life characterized by futility. He called on those he wrote to, including us, to remember that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven to be with his Father. We, too, are promised eternal life. We are promised that our faithfulness and obedience to God leads us down the road to everlasting life.

Those who do not believe this may feel there is nothing for which to live and nothing for which to die. To those who do not believe there is more than this earthly life, life just doesn't matter, it has no ultimate purpose. How they live or die, what they believe or don't believe...just doesn't matter. Life is mere existence without purpose and meaning.

A father went into a toy store to buy his son a Christmas present. The salesman showed him an educational toy. It came unassembled, but no matter how the child put the pieces together, they wouldn't fit. You see, the toy was designed to teach the child how to deal with life.

Such is the predicament of a person without God. He is never able to put his life together, A life without Christ, the resurrected Christ, and the hope for the same for oneself, is a life of futility.

But those who believe know that what they experience now is not all there is to life, and they have hope to sustain them through times of distress. Holding steadfast to their faith, living the Christ-filled life allows them to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

There is more encouragement to be found in Peter's words. He says that because of what God has done for us, and because we have Christ in our lives, we are bound together. Our relationship with other brothers and sisters in Christ is priceless. Our love, nurtured by our faith becomes an expression of sincere deep love for one another. This is a selfless kind of love; and because it grounded on our relationship with God, it has substance. It is not a mere feeling of warm fuzzies. As we build one another up and help one another navigate the highs and lows of life, we further nurture the substance in one another's souls by bringing God's presence in a very personal way to each other. To be loved is something we all crave, and it's something we all need. God's love for us and our love for each other not only satisfy our craving and need, it makes us thrive.

These few verses are packed with wisdom and encouragement, telling us, that we need more than a lifestyle, we need substance in our lives, not only to give our lives meaning, but to sustain us on our journey, particularly when those times of pain and suffering strike us down. God gives us the substance, God is the substance, we need in our lives, to truly live, in this lifetime and with the hope of the lifetime to come. Isn't that what we all want? Amen.