

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Alleluia. (Psalm 119:105)

Prayer of the Day:

Eternal Father before whom all generations rise and fall, teach us to think earnestly on the brevity of our lives and on the immensity of your goodness. Help us to enter the New Year trusting in the name of your Son and walking in the way of his peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sermon Text:

I went surfing the net this week. I typed in 2023 a year in review. I think what I found I might call a mixed bag. In local news, there were heartwarming personal interest stories of people helping people. It was the kind of stuff that fuels your hope in humanity as a whole and makes you think it might just not all be that bad out there in this spinning ball we call Earth. Of course, Earth is more global than local in its content, and when I widened the view to growing trends in our world today, overall confidence in world institutions and leaders, the big stories of 2023 at that level, well, let's just say it wasn't so heartwarming. Confidence in just about everything seemed to wane. Whether in banks and businesses, our courts and governments, or authority in general most of the confidence polls were trending down. I suppose that's not really shocking either given the headlines for the year. Rising interest rates, fear of depression in financial markets, growing distrust in our two-party system, and an increasing nervousness with a court that has been more and more involved in the political fray. Businesses rocked by shortages of product and people and then a growing distrust of the worker who has had to span the gap for longer than they would like. Wars and rumors of wars along with the inhumane conditions they seem to inspire and exacerbate. I suppose we might sum it up with the word "instability", at least on the larger level.

I wonder if instability was on Peter's mind as he wrote, by the inspiration of God, to God's elect scattered throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The world of Peter's day was brutal. In many ways, it would make what we experienced in 2023 look like a walk in the park. So it is no surprise that the word suffering pops up at least 17 times in the book's 5 chapters. As he writes he speaks of the growing persecutions, the painful trials, that Christians are having to face and even predicts that this will only increase in the coming days. Christians were hunted down like dogs and then fed to them for the enjoyment of the populace in coliseums. The politics of the day viewed the followers of Jesus to be a spreading plague within her regions. I suppose if Peter were to have sat down and written a review of the things he had heard and seen "instability" might just describe the state of the world he was living in.

But none of this is surprising. In fact, it's a tale as old as time itself, at least time after the fall into sin. So Peter reaches back into the Old Testament vault and hauls out words from Ezekiel, *All men are like grass, and all their glory is the flowers of the field*. I'm not a farmer ... not a gardener ... truth be told I can't keep plants alive for very long at all. *Grass withers and flowers fall*. Seems that way doesn't it? Spring brings bursts of color and life as plants spring up in abundance only to succumb to the cooler climes of fall aptly named for the piles of dead leaves and withered-up plants that litter the landscape.

Oh, we love to believe differently. We make relatively minuscule moments into mountains of meaning. We spend our energies regaling each other with stories about the good old days when men were men and women were women and life was good and most importantly when we were at our prime but grass withers and flowers fall and we and all our glory, well I wonder how many people would even know who Peter was, let alone any of us?

Sermon Text from 1 Peter 1:23-25

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you. NIV84

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and flowers fall. I read somewhere once that Martin Luther was relatively convinced that he had to be living near the end. Things couldn't get much worse, surely God would come back pretty soon. You think Peter thought the same? Ezekiel? I think it all the time but I wonder if that's just because everyone thinks so. The cycle seems to rinse and repeat its way through the history books.

Yes, as we said before, ever since the garden, the serpent, and Adam and Eve. So we come to the real problem. Sin reared its ugly head in the hiss of Satan. Imbedded itself in humanity as perfection was lost, handed down like some genetic plague ever since. Oh, we can try to explain it away. We can try to make it seem like our sins aren't really that big of a deal but then the history of humanity, our own lives with their aches and pains, their problems, well they tell the tale. *All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall. The soul who sins is the one who will die* (Ezekiel 18:20). Sin makes us perishable seed.

I suppose if that were all we could say tonight, it would be a pretty dismal world to live in. But Peter, yes, God through Peter has so much more to say. Instead of masking the problem with worldly excess and ease or medicating it with thoughts of glory and grandeur there is an actual solution to this.

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. No longer perishable, there is embedded in that knowledge real meaning then. Paul even tells us how this imperishable nature comes to us. Through the living and enduring Word of God. You see, that Word connected to water made a real difference as it was splashed upon your forehead. There, the Holy Spirit worked through Baptism exactly as He had promised to implant faith in your heart. That day death died as you were connected to life. Life we don't earn or deserve but life that is won for us, handed to us in the victory that Christ attains in our place. That's why perfection needed to become flesh untouched by the plague which is passed down from one generation of sinful parents to the next. Though He was perfect, and deserving of far better, Jesus went to the cross and perished for the perishable seed handed down ever since the time of Adam and Eve and in His resurrection, the promise *you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.* This truth is strengthened just like our faith every time we hear, every time we receive it as it is again connected to simple wine and bread, miraculously that body, the very blood which won heaven for us.

Knowing that something transcends the withering grasses and the falling flowers of the world around us, Peter acknowledges that life will be different. The perishable stuff of life will no longer be our goal and aim. We will no longer be rocked by the instability it brings. Instead, we will find our rock, our comfort, our hope in God, in His holy Word. Notice it is the opposite of instability! *"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever."*

In the days after Martin Luther was called home to heaven, things didn't get easier for Lutherans in Germany. Wars broke out between princes and principalities, often along religious lines as the Holy Roman Empire sought to restabilize the region. In the battles that ensued, Lutheran soldiers would often inscribe four letters on the shields, armor, or their shirts and battle flags. VDMA was shorthand for "Verbum Domine Manet in Aeternum" or "The Word of the Lord Stands Forever." It was a reminder of what they were fighting for. It was a reminder of where real stability is found. It was a reminder that in a world overrun by sin and its consequences, there was a safehaven not given by the fleeting hands of men to which they could always run and where they would always find security, peace, and forgiveness.

God's elect, living in a world of instability, as one year passes into another, it may feel like there is nothing that isn't changing, nothing that is stable until we turn our eyes back to our God, back to His Word, back to His forgiveness and grace. You may not need to inscribe it on your clothing but may we live in it every day, every year of our lives. *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.*