

Aliens

1 Peter 2:1-11

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I loved the movie, “Life Is Beautiful.” It won several Academy Awards 10 or 12 years ago, including the award for Best Actor for Roberto Benigni. Unfortunately, a lot of people missed the movie because it is in Italian, with subtitles, and for many of us that’s too much work when we go to be entertained. But that’s a shame, because for me, it ranks right up there as one of my all-time favorite movies.

For those of you who have seen it, bear with me for a couple of minutes; for those of you who have not seen it, let me give you a brief synopsis. The movie starts off as a sweet love story telling about Guido (that’s the character played by Benigni) who falls in love with Dora. They get married and have a son, and all is going along nicely.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Guido is a Jew living in Fascist Italy. The year is 1945 in the waning days of the war, and the Italian Jews are under constant persecution. One day without any warning, the police break into Guido’s home and take his family into custody. Soon after, they are herded like cattle onto a train bound for a concentration camp. The camp is a place of horror and death, where healthy men and women work all day long melting down metal for weapons, while those who are too old, too sick, or too young to endure hard labor are sent to the showers.

And the sweet love story turns dark. Guido is, of course, well aware of what is happening at the camp, and he resolves to shield his five-year-old son from the horror. So Guido spins this elaborate story to convince his son that this is all a game. We, the viewers, know it is not a game; Guido knows it is not a game, but his little son becomes convinced that it is a game—with a lot of hide and seek, and make-believe and a game Guido calls “Silence.” It’s like the son is living in one world, and everyone else is living in another. The son is operating with one set of assumptions about what is going on, while everyone else has another set of assumptions. It’s almost like the son is an alien, out of step with everyone around him.

I’m not going to tell you how the story ends; it’s this resident alien idea that I want to pick up on.

Because I believe that is the same idea that this scripture passage is conveying about Christians. Christians live in the world, but it is almost as if Christians are aliens because they think and act in a way that is different from the way the rest of the world thinks and acts. In fact, that is how Peter concludes this passage—calling Christians “aliens” and “exiles.”

Look at the images Peter uses throughout this passage. He says that we are “like newborn infants.” That is, we who are Christians have been born into a whole new way of thinking and living. He talks about the “spiritual milk.” One of the commentaries I read said that new converts to Christianity were often fed milk mixed with honey so that they could literally taste the sweetness of God’s grace. Psalm 34:8 says, “O taste and see that the Lord is good.” Three times in these few verses, Peter says that we have been “chosen” by God. And when he comes to the end, he gives his wonderful affirmation: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. Once you

were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." The wonderful grace of God is what ties this passage together. By the goodness and grace of God we have been chosen, called, transformed, born into a whole new life.

So then the question that remains is this: how are we to live in this world as God's chosen people? The one thing that is clear is that we do not live like the rest of the world lives.

Back in the second century AD, a letter was circulated around that described how Christians were living in the world. The letter said,

Christians are indistinguishable from other people either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but live as if they are aliens, as citizens of heaven (Epistle to Diognetus, "The Christian in the World").

As resident aliens, we who are followers of Jesus are always somewhat out of step with the way the rest of the world thinks and acts.

Which leads me to wonder about us. Is there any sense in which we are living in a way that is different from the rest of the world? Or have we given in to live just like everyone else?

Peter seems to think that there is a need for us who are Christians to act in a way that is different from the rest of the world—for us to live as resident aliens, to live in this world, but as citizens of heaven.

I want to suggest a couple of places where I think we as Christians are called to live differently from the world out there.

One place is in the area of the language that we use. I'm not talking about four-letter words and other profanity. I'm thinking of other words that we use. The word "God", for instance. These days the word "God" has become just another word—an expletive we use to express surprise or frustration. "O my God," people say. People say it without thinking; they say that they don't really mean anything by it; it's just an expression. And that, for me, is precisely the problem. For the Hebrews the name of God was so sacred that no one would dare to utter the name aloud. We, on the other hand, can use the word "God" and have it not mean anything at all.

I would like to urge us who are Christians to refuse to speak the name "God" except to refer to our heavenly Father. I have a friend that every time he hears the word "God," he gives a small bow of his head in respect. Even if the person using the word is using it in a disrespectful way, my friend bows his head. It might be that when others see us honoring and respecting the name of God, they will begin to do so as well.

Another area of language has to do with the labels we hang on people. You know what I mean—the homosexual is labeled "queer" or "fruit" or "fairy." The homeless

person is labeled “bum.” We’ve got derogatory names for black people, Hispanic people, mentally ill people, poor people.

We need to expunge these demeaning names from our vocabulary. We need to learn how to see all of our brothers and sisters with the same eyes with which God sees us—a chosen race, God’s own people. We need to learn how to honor and respect our brothers and sisters in the way that we want to be honored and respected.

Peter calls us to put away all malice and slander. One place we can do that is in the language we use.

Another way in which Christians act as resident aliens in this world is in the way we react when we believe that we have been wronged. You know the world’s way: don’t get mad, get even. If you have been wronged, look for an opportunity to even the score. If you let somebody walk over you, they’ll use you and abuse you. That’s the way the world teaches us to react when we have been wronged.

But that’s not what Jesus says. Those who are followers of Jesus simply refuse to seek revenge or to retaliate. There is no place for revenge in the Christian life. Just look at the Arab-Israeli conflict for evidence that revenge doesn’t work; it doesn’t accomplish anything except to bring about yet more revenge. The only way to break the cycle of violence is for one of the parties to refuse to strike back.

I don’t pretend that this is easy; I just believe that it is what we as Christians are called to be and do.

It seems to be that there is one standard by which Christians live: what is the loving thing to do? I would like to learn how to live in such a way that I never react—that is, let the actions of others shape my actions. I want to resolve to act, and to act in only one way: what does love require? What does love require of us in the way we relate to those with whom we disagree? What does love require as we relate to the stranger in our midst? Again, I don’t pretend that this is easy, because often it is not clear what is the loving thing to do. Nevertheless, I believe that is the standard for living by which Jesus calls us to live.

But this warning: when we choose to live in this way, we are going to find ourselves out of step with the way many of our neighbors think. We may even feel like aliens. But maybe that’s what it’s going to take to make this world the kind of world God wants it to be.✠