

“A Church for Aliens”

I Peter 2:4-12

Series: Deeper Week 7. Join the Movement

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He walked slowly, shuffling in a perpetual stoop. The top of his head was free from any trace of hair. The glasses that embraced his wrinkled face rested on a prominent nose. And his words were challenging to decipher. At least, that's how I remember him.

But the history those eyes witnessed, the stories those ears gathered, the tales those lips could tell, and the distances those dragging feet once trod are a wonder to me. I only knew my great grandfather, Haig Simsarian, during the ninth and tenth decades of his days on earth. He was so old that, in my child's mind, I thought he might just live forever. Maybe God had forgotten him. I found it hard to understand him. And like most restless, fidgety kids, I did not have the patience to sit still at the Thanksgiving table and listen to him. When he died at 98 in a nursing home near our house, I knew almost nothing about his incredible sojourn. It is a tale of the great dangers and heart-wrenching farewells my ancestors, and many of yours, faced on their way to this Promised Land.

He was born just south of Eden. In the second chapter of the Bible it states,
A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters...The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates (Genesis 2:10, 14)

My great-grandfather Haig was born among the sizeable Armenian community in the city of Diyarbakir which lies on the banks of the Tigris 100 kilometers downriver from its source near the headwaters of the Euphrates. Humans have lived in this region since the Stone Age. The black basalt stone city walls, built by the Romans, are still-standing.

My great great-grandfather Hagop was a pillar of the Armenian community. He introduced Swiss watches to the city which earned him the name 'Hagop the Watchmaker.' Hagop and his wife Ogida had six children. My great-grandfather Haig was their second son. Diyarbakir may have been south of Eden but it was no paradise. The late 19th and early 20th century witnessed devastating persecutions of Armenians by the Turks and Kurds. Sultan Abdul Hamid II, whose blood-thirsty acts earned him the title the Red Sultan, ignited a savage purge of Christians which swept across Turkey. On November 1, 1895 the massacre reached Diyarbakir.

Muslims began attacking Armenians and other Christians. They then started looting, and were joined by common civilians and government officials alike. The entire market area was set on fire, the fire soon got out of control and destroyed hundreds of shops and workshops. The Christians who could not run away from the mob were shot. Attacks on Christian neighborhoods began the following morning in a systematic manner: houses were looted and burned; men, women and children killed; and girls were kidnapped and converted to Islam. Some Christians were able to protect themselves with the few weapons that they had owned in narrow streets which were defensible.

Hagop's watch store was among those burned to the ground. They lived in a three-story home with an inner courtyard. As the danger mounted on Friday, panic-stricken Armenians fled to the relative safety of their home. The adult men took their posts on the roof with fifty old rifles. My great grandfather Haig was thirteen. It was his job to supply the defenders with bread, cheese, and tobacco. In the enclosure below, terrified families huddled close. Not all Turks were belligerent. My great-grandfather Haig recalls,

When the trouble began with the Turks, Ibrahim, the Turkish government official, sent half-a-dozen soldiers to protect (our) family. But my father refused to take his family and go with them. Instead he sent his thanks and...stated that there were three hundred people with him at his house, and they were all afraid of being slaughtered. If they were to die, he would die with them.

Each long tense hour of Saturday passed. On Sunday morning they prayed to the Lord. By Sunday noon, the attack was called off by the local governor. According to *The Atlas of the Armenian Genocide*, In Diyarbekir,

Over 2,000 people were killed, 119 Armenian villages were destroyed and 6,000 families were killed in (surrounding region). The number of killed and missing people was 30,000.

The massacres in Western Armenia were organized by the government of (Sultan) Abdul Hamid, the aim of which was to annihilate the Armenians in their historical homeland...(and) the whole country. In 1894-1896, the number of slaughtered Armenians reached 300,000.

Although he was relieved, my great great-grandfather knew this was only a temporary break in the attacks. He had to get his family out of danger before the next wave of persecution struck. The most savage and systematic persecutions started in 1915 in what today is called The Armenian Genocide. The Armenian population of Turkey was murdered, forcibly converted to Islam or sent on death marches into the desert. One and a half million men, women and children never survived. It was the first genocide of the twentieth century. Years later, when they asked Hitler why he thought he could get away with the Holocaust he replied, "Who remembers the Armenians?" To this day, the Turkish Government refuses to acknowledge it happened.

In the first century, the Apostle Peter wrote a letter to Christians in this same area of the world – the land we call Turkey today. The new believers who received this letter were also persecuted. Peter writes,

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering. (I Peter 4:12)

If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name (I Peter 4:16)

Resist (the devil), standing firm in the faith because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (I Peter 5:9)

In the United States we do not face persecution as Christians did then and still do around the world. Yet there is a widening gap between Christianity and American culture. At one time many thought they were the same. The United States was called a Christian nation. I won't waste time debating whether that was true or not. One thing I do know: in the future there will be a greater separation between Church and Culture. The Culture no longer encourages people to go to church as it once did. An increasing number of people claim no affiliation with any church, a growing number of children know nothing about the Bible, and escalating tide of churches are closing. We just closed another one at Presbytery last week.

We don't need the Culture or the State to prop up the Church. The Culture didn't prop up the first Christians, the Armenian Christians, the Chinese Christians. The Culture persecuted and put them to death. I am not saying any of this to alarm you. I'm not predicting coming persecution. Yet a time is coming, and perhaps is already here, when there will be no middle ground. Either you are a follower of the Culture or you are a follower of Christ. It is time to go back to the basics and learn from the New Testament God's plan for His Church, to learn how to live for God in this Culture.

If you want to have a deeper relationship with God you have to stand up and be counted, you must **Join His Movement**. The Church is not an institution. The Church is a Movement of God's people. Peter says to the Christians scattered throughout the Empire,

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (I Peter 2:4-5)

In these verses Peter is comparing the old Temple in Jerusalem to the new Temple, the Church. The old Temple was built of lifeless stones. The new Temple is built of living stones – people. The old Temple was in one place. The new Temple is everywhere God's living stones are. The old Temple was destroyed in AD 70 and has never been rebuilt. The new Temple can't be destroyed. It keeps going and growing for two thousand years. To be reconciled to God, to receive His forgiveness, you had to go to the old Temple and ask a priest to offer your animal sacrifice to God on the altar. Now, you can be reconciled to God and receive His forgiveness wherever you find one of His living stones because each one of you is a priest, each one of you can offer a spiritual sacrifice. Each one of you can help someone be reconciled to God and receive His grace.

Humans have a habit of taking God's movement and making it an institution. What's wrong with that? Movements spread everywhere. Institutions are usually stuck in one place. Movements involve everyone. Institutions usually have a few leaders and a lot of spectators. Movements grow and multiply. Institutions slow things down. Not all Movements are good. Neither are all Institutions. Yet whenever the Holy Spirit wants to renew the Church He does it through a Movement that challenges an Institution. You've

heard me say it many times: the Church is not a building, a day of the week or the pastor. It is not an Institution. It is a Movement of living stones. And you are one of those stones.

With all the tension in Diyarbakir, my great great-grandfather Hagop made plans to move his family to safety. He gave his oldest son Stepan a stock of watches and told him to open a store and establish himself in Baghdad. Then he would move his family to safety. It was a reasonable plan. Stay in the Middle East. Open a watch store. Sounds very institutional. Stepan, however, was afflicted with wanderlust. He wanted to move. He went to Baghdad, sold his merchandise and bought passage to America. He did not inform his father of this decision until he reached Connecticut. So the family went to America instead of Baghdad. Thus, through the wayward whim of a young man, my family became numbered among the great movement of Armenians who spread around the world and I was born in America not Baghdad, Iraq. The Turks destroyed the church buildings in Diyarbakir but they couldn't destroy the Church. It simply moved. Movements are risky but they open the door to a better future.

So how are we supposed to live in this Movement called the Church? **Live As Immigrants.** Peter says,

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage 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. (I Peter 2:11-12)

It may sound strange but we are a Church of aliens. Not aliens from outer space. We are resident aliens. When someone is a resident alien that means they were born in another country, they are citizens of another nation, but they live in this one. As they live here, they may have different customs and practices, different beliefs and values than the majority. Their residence is here, but their homeland and their heart are still where they came from. I was so delighted at our latest Roots class to welcome people who were born in Africa, India and Europe. God is truly blessing us.

On November 24, 1896, forty adults and ten children departed through an ancient gate of Diyarbakir riding on pack horses. My great grandfather Haig and his grandmother were among these refugees. As he took a final forlorn look at his parents, he did not know this would be the last time he would see his home or his father Hagop who died of cancer in 1899. They sailed by steamship across the Mediterranean Sea. When they reached French soil, they only had enough money to send my great grandfather to America. At fourteen years of age he traveled alone in steerage across the Atlantic. Arriving in New York, he glimpsed the Statue of Liberty when she was ten years old.

How did it feel to be an alien, a stranger in a strange land, and to know that a single word from an official on Ellis Island could send him back to the persecution and death from which he fled? Once through immigration, a distant relative put him on a train to Holyoke, Massachusetts. When he stepped off the train he saw a familiar face – his brother Stepan. Haig was terribly homesick for his parents and his birthplace. But seeing his brother made this strange new place feel a little more like home. For the next eighty-

four years he worked to bless the people of this land. His home was here but his heart was back where he was from.

How can Christians be resident aliens in the country of their birth? Peter says if you are in God's Movement you have a new birth (I Peter 1:3, 23) in His Kingdom. You are now citizens of His nation. Your residence is here but your home and your heart are where you are going – the Kingdom of Heaven. That means you live in this world but not of it. You don't indulge in the things that draw you away from God, the idols that steal your love for God. You don't retaliate when people accuse you or criticize you. You don't judge or condemn what others do. Instead you live a life that is pleasing to God. You do good to those around you. You love God even if your neighbors love idols. You bless and love your neighbors even if they don't love you.

And that's what we are to do in God's Movement – to **Follow His Mission.**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (I Peter 2:9-10)

If you are in God's Movement, then He has chosen you, called you, commissioned you, to help everyone find their way back to God. You are a royal priest, a priest of King Jesus. The job of a priest is to help people connect with God and be reconciled to God. If God has helped you go from darkness to light, then your role is to help others go from whatever darkness they are into God's light. If you have received God's grace and mercy then your job is to help others to receive God's grace and mercy. If you gather here to praise God, then your mission is to help others love and praise God. How do you do this? By sharing Good News and Good Deeds with everyone. Show kindness. Offer help. Listen. Share a meal. Serve. Pray for others. And when the opportunity arises, share the story of how God showed you mercy and helped you walk from darkness to His Light.

The way God grows His Movement is by Multiplication. If you attend worship, invite someone to worship with you. If you are in a Growth Group, invite someone to come to your Growth Group. If you lead a Growth Group, ask some members to help you start a new Growth Group. If you have an idea for a mission or ministry, we'll help you get it started. God may want you to help start a new church. God is calling Woodside to start more worship services, more ministries, more Growth Groups, more churches which will start more worship services, ministries, groups and churches.

My great grandfather loved this country because it saved him and his family from the Genocide, it gave him the freedom to work and worship without fear. He invested his life in building up the community where he settled in New Jersey. Everyone in town called him "Uncle Haig." He helped start an Armenian Church in his city. He held every post from trustee and president to janitor. Twice he was sent as their delegate to Soviet Armenia. The head of the Armenian Apostolic Church is called the Catholicos. In the Roman Catholic Church the Pope is elected by clergy. The Catholicos is elected by equal numbers of clergy and laity from around the world. Twice, in 1932 and 1955, my Great

Grandfather Haig journeyed to Holy Etchmiadzin, the “Vatican” of the Armenians, to elect the Catholicos the head of their Church.

On my recent visit to Armenia, our group was granted a private audience with the current Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II and to worship with him in a place of honor in the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin. Our visit was filmed and aired on the Armenian news that week throughout the Middle East. On that day, I took my place near the same spot where my Great Grandfather Haig stood when he visited Armenia in 1932.

I had come full-circle. I never visited there before and yet I felt I had come home.

But I’m not home yet. And neither are you.

This world is not our home. We belong to the Kingdom of heaven.

Let’s join His movement.

Let’s invite many to join us so that we can all one day come home.