

A Series to Help with the New Normal

Preaching Resources

Week 1: Living in the Wilderness | Exodus, Numbers 14:1-25

The Purpose of this message is to give listeners a handle to grab on to in order to successfully cope and live through their “wilderness” experiences in these days. The message has three basic parts:

Intro: Get People Intellectually And Emotionally In The Wilderness

Craft an introduction that gets people to feel the emotions of “the wilderness” Should be easy to do. Videos can help you do this. End with the reality check of how our world has been turned “upside down” (show logo)

Give examples of effects of pandemic on our world and an identification of the emotions people from anger to anxiety. No matter where you are on the social distancing the lockdown issues, we have ALL had our world turned upside down which has resulted in a sense of helplessness – which is compounded by the realization that we are in this for long haul. No quick fixes. Purpose of this series is to move us to the point where we can thrive as the people of God in the “new normal” yet to be revealed.

Body: Learn From The People Of God Who Have Been There Before Us

Build this section to highlight the importance and consistency of the “tent of meeting” that provided all of Israel with the stability and centering it needed in order to live successfully in the wilderness (you could also choose the Tabernacle to get to the same ends).

You might want to use following points:

It’s odd that the book of Numbers really doesn’t have a beginning, nor does it have an ending. The Hebrew name for the book itself means, “in the wilderness.”

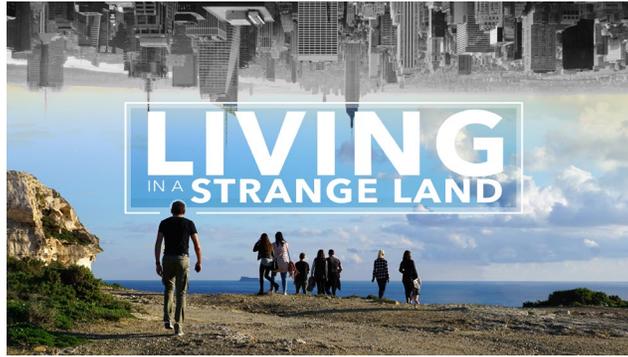
Numbers is 40 years of circular wandering – many times people’s lives feel like that.

That shows that it is just part of the story of the people of God. We should expect wilderness times, but that doesn’t mean the story is over.

No beginning. No ending. Circular wanderings. You’d think the book is a total mess. But don’t judge a book by its cover...

It’s here you can chose a topical or exegetical approach to the text(s) you might select. Given the direction of the message, the topical choice may be somewhat easier. Scripture choices from the book of Numbers about the tent of meeting or tabernacle and its role would work. Even Numbers 1:1.

You could choose to exegete Numbers 14:1-25 (the people complain and want to go back to Egypt), but stress that their desire represents the power of the emotional need they had to live with some sense of control over their lives, even if it meant walking away from the future God had promised them (that preaches!)



With either approach, end with recognition that these are our collective and individual “wilderness days”, and we too feel like we are either walking aimlessly or in circles like much of Israel did. As Christians, it’s easy to be sucked into this downward spiral. We can’t afford to have amnesia about the promises of God. This is not our home. Our future lies heavenward. But how do we live in the meantime?

Ending: Encourage and enable listeners to do what they did and more (okay, maybe not everything they did – i.e. complain)

This is the practical application piece. You may have different actions you may wish to expound. Pay attention to trying to create the sense that what was emotionally lost (or stolen) in the wilderness experience, can be reclaimed through these simple actions done consistently and as a center activity – not something done on the periphery or “added to the day.”

Suggestions might be:

- Find your “tent of meeting” (devotional moments) and stick with it.
- Find something that brings you joy and carve out time each day to do it.
- Express gratefulness and thankfulness to at least one person (+ Jesus) each day.

For the preacher: You might consider asking the Andy Stanley 4 questions: (learned this years ago and try to apply them to every message).

What do I want you to know?

That the wilderness time is normal in the “in between” times when something ends and the new begins. We are a people of new beginnings.

Why do I want you to know it?

Because we must have hope. It is necessary for our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

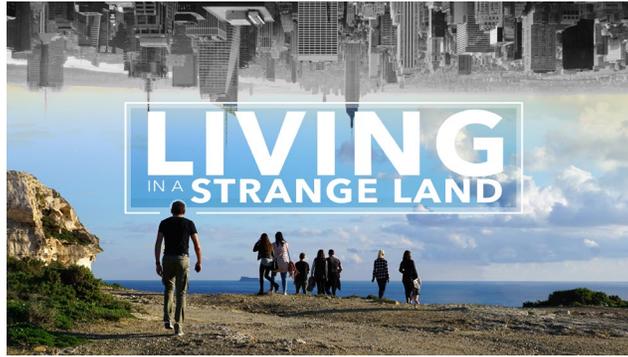
What do I want you to do?

The practical application actions

Why do I want you to do it?

So that the wilderness does not overtake you.

Remind people that their church represents the “tent of meeting” to their community – maybe now more than ever.



Week 2: Living in a Strange Land | Jeremiah 29

In 2005, my wife and I had the privilege of participating in the Ministerial Exchange Program of the World Methodist Council. After a process of application and interview, we were matched with a pastor in the British Methodist Church in the county of Essex in eastern England. For six glorious weeks that summer, we had the joy of immersing ourselves in a nation that I had always longed to visit. As part of the exchange program, my colleague, Rev. Robin Searles, and I would switch lives, so to speak, for those six weeks. We lived in his home, drove his car, and pastored his churches, while he did the same here.

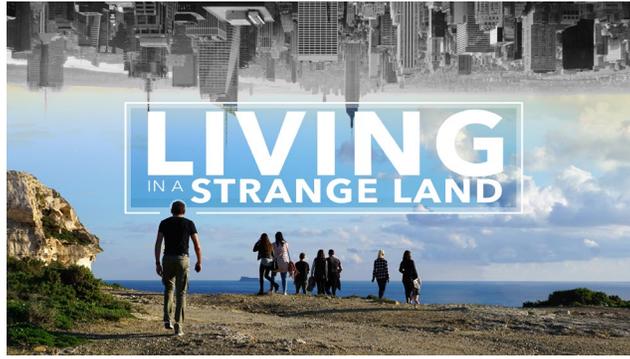
While our experience was only brief, and England and the U.S. certainly have much more in common than other areas of the world where we might have been placed, there was a pretty steep learning curve to navigate. Not the least of which was learning to drive on the left side of the road, with roundabouts and road signs that point out destinations along the route rather than east, west, north or south. And all of this was before the age of GPS. We needed to learn to shop for meals differently, as the refrigerator in our manse, as it was called, was little larger than the mini-fridge in my college dorm room. We spent four days with cold showers, until we learned that you turn the hot water on and off in another room before heading in. And though both nations speak English, there was still a language barrier. It was a full three weeks before I learned that when I came up to me and said, "Are you all right?" it wasn't a commentary on the way I looked on a particular day, but the way that this part of the country simply said, "Hi. How are you?"

There are, nowadays, entire online communities dedicated to expats, or expatriates, those living in a different country than their homeland, either temporarily or permanently. One such community, calling itself, Internations, offers articles for those who find themselves living in a different world.

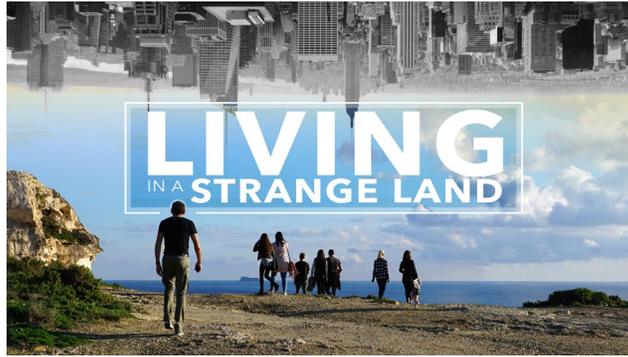
On their website, www.internations.org, I found an article about settling in to a new place, especially when you aren't sure if it's simply for an extended stay or for good. I thought there were some good tips in the article, entitled, "Make Yourself at Home" (<https://www.internations.org/guide/global/make-yourself-at-home-15271>)

1. Give Your New Home a Personal Touch – Whether you are in a hotel room for a few weeks, a furnished apartment for several months, or settling into more permanent home life in a new country, adding something personalized, near and dear to your heart will help avoid acute home-sickness.
2. Take a Shopping Field Trip – Having made a list of the things that you need to turn your new house into a home, take a field trip to places that offer opportunities for shopping – incorporating some things from your new culture that fit with your own personal taste in order to learn more about your new "home" and make that home yours.
3. Become an Explorer – Get out the GPS or the good old-fashioned map of your new town and start walking or driving to explore what it has to offer. From shops and cafes to parks and playgrounds. And don't hesitate to ask the locals where they find the freshest produce or what local festivities are worth joining in on.

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and even now when some of our area is coming out of a stay-at-home order, we may find ourselves muttering the words of Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." Even though most of us have not physically moved, we recognize that the world we're living in is not the same as it was a few months ago. And we also realize that we don't know if this is a short-term stay or a permanent



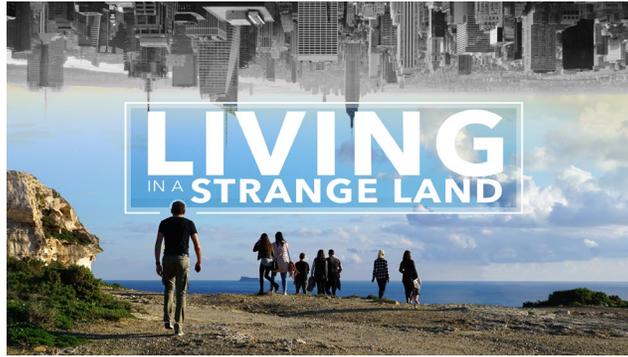
transition to life on the other side of COVID-19. This is also incredibly real to those of us in the church. Of the many things that we know, church as we have experienced it, as recently as February, is not coming back any time soon, if at all. And while we can (and I believe should) grieve some of that, I also wholeheartedly believe that we should look for opportunities to embrace this as an opportunity for faithful living in the here and the now – in ways that connect us to God and others in the power of Jesus, and ways that allow glimpses of the kingdom of God to be seen even in this whole new world.



As we continue in a series on Living in a Strange Land, we have been remembering that we are not the first people to find ourselves living in a strange land. Our Scripture for this week comes from the prophet Jeremiah, speaking to a people who found themselves in exile. In the case of the Israelite people, they found themselves exiled in Babylon – a country that was both foreign and hostile to them – not by their choice, but as consequence of centuries of choices. To these unwilling expats, the prophet Jeremiah sends a letter from Jerusalem to his sisters and brothers living in a foreign country. In the passage from chapter 29, where we turn our focus this week, we tend to jump ahead to verse 11, often reading it out of context that God would soon take the exiles out of Babylon and back to “the good old days.” But before we get there, let’s take a look at Jeremiah’s insight into what it would mean for the people of God to faithfully live in the strange land in which they found themselves, and what God might want to say to us where we find ourselves today.

Settle in.

- In verse 5, God speaks through the prophet, “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” God wouldn’t be telling the people to build houses if they were only going to be there a few weeks. Though the promise of God would eventually offer the opportunity to find their way out of exile, God wanted them to know going back to life as it had been before wasn’t going to happen, nor did they want it to. Remember that things weren’t all rosy before the exile, and for their lives and relationship with God to be all that they were meant to be, moving forward in the spot they now occupied was the only option.
- I believe that the church is being called to settle into the world in which we find ourselves even as we continue trusting in the promise of God. Settling into a new country requires a posture of openness, a holy curiosity about the place in which we find ourselves, and a passion for learning about new ways to be followers of Jesus and the church in this place and time.
- Even with some hopeful signs about potential treatments and the road to vaccine seeing some light on the horizon, we will find ourselves in this place for some time. God is inviting the Church to make our home in this new normal, leveraging what we are learning about engaging persons in worship, care, discipleship and mission in ways different than we may have ever imagined. We need to acknowledge that the good old days, when we may have made idols of our buildings and sought to establish our present practices as eternal principles were neither allowing us to experience the kingdom in its fullness nor helping us reach out to a hurting and broken world with the gospel.
- Hear me clearly, I am not saying that God gave us this current global crisis as either punishment for previous wrongdoing or avenue for God’s unfolding plan. I do believe, however, that God invites those who seek to follow Jesus to make their home in the new normal in ways that acknowledge that God is in this place, even though we may not have recognized it.



Build relationships.

- Verse 6 instructs the people to, “Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.”
- From creation, relationship has been a defining characteristic of those bearing the image of God in which all of humankind was formed. God instructs the people of Israel to establish relationships, families, with those in their new country. Even from a faithful remnant, God was seeking to grow a nation that would outnumber the stars in the sky or the grains of sand in the seas. Rather than isolate themselves to be protected from the unwashed masses around them, the people of God were called to build relationships and widen the circle of sisters and brothers who would live in covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- Jokes about a coming boom of quarantine babies aside, I believe the season in which we find ourselves offers the Church an invitation to build relationships in ways that may not have been possible even a few months ago. Forced to abandon our holy huddles on Sunday mornings, we have been invited to connect in different ways with different people. The opportunities and need for relationship with those who are feeling alone, adrift and filled with anxiety or fear for the future has perhaps never been stronger. In an increasingly polarized world, the body of Christ is called to embody beloved community – in relationships that offer healing, seek peace and justice, and incarnate love. Those relationships not only change others. They shape us into the image of Jesus day by day.

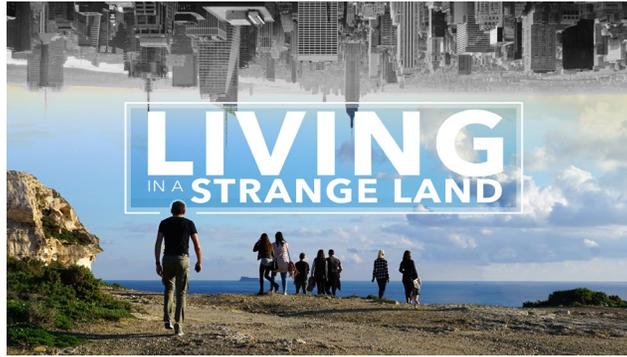
Share blessings.

- Verse 7, “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”
- Earlier in the story of God’s people, God called Abram to leave his homeland for a place he did not know. In that call, God outlined both a promise and a purpose for the move. In Genesis 12:2, God says to Abram, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”
- The blessing of being God’s people was always to be a conduit for God blessing the nations. The message comes to new life in Jeremiah’s word to the exiles. Not only were they to settle in and build relationships. They were called to intentionally seek the blessing, peace and prosperity of the place that they had not yet learned to call home.
- Church, there is much that we don’t know about this new world in which we find ourselves. But God’s call is clear: bless this new world by incarnating the presence of Jesus here. Proclaim good news to the poor. Proclaim freedom for the imprisoned. Set the oppressed free. Give food to the hungry. Visit the sick. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Let your light shine. Go into all this new world and preach the gospel to all creation.



We may feel like we are living in a foreign land, ripped from the land of familiar, and torn from the life and church that we thought we knew. But in the words of C.S. Lewis, "When we lose one blessing, another is often most unexpectedly given in its place." The Israelites found themselves in exile in Babylon, a foreboding place that was not home. And yet, they were called by God to order their daily lives around settling in, building relationship and sharing blessing. People of God, we are still called to do the same.

But throughout Scripture, a challenge, a calling, or an invitation is often followed by a promise. As we close today, hear the promise God gives the people later in Jeremiah 29. Though the wait might be long, seventy years, in fact, God says, the blessing, the plan, the hope are real. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity."



Week 3: Living in Isolation | Daniel 6

As with most sermons, there are any number of directions you could go with theme, especially in these days: the isolation of and ICU patient; the isolation of being quarantined; etc. And you can find a number of examples from the life of Daniel to illustrate his isolation in following God in a pagan world. It required a great deal of discipline and integrity to do so, especially when separated from a faith community. Many a message can be developed on this theme.

This message outline begins with this premise but focuses on the example of Daniel to do what he did while maintaining a non-anxious presence. One of the crucial points of the message is that in times of crisis, the non-anxious presence is the calming, focused and grounded presence others need to experience. The countless admonitions in scripture to “fear not, or, don’t be afraid” remind us that not only is anxiousness unnecessary, but has detrimental effects.

The messages stresses necessity of a framework for living as critical to maintaining a non-anxious presence that smooths the rippling sands of the wilderness.

The following is to be read as a sort of “thought flow chart” with one thought connecting to another. There are many ways to go with this. In fact, if I were to write this message three days in a row, I doubt that any two would be the same. That’s okay as long as it is authentic to the preacher. This is just what I would do. You will undoubtedly do it differently

Scripture: Daniel 6:14-23

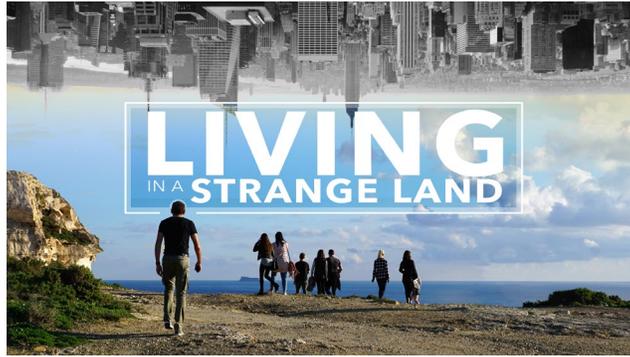
I choose this passage because it is a familiar story and highlights the points of integrity and non-anxiousness. I start near the famous conclusion of the story which actually beings at the end of chapter 5. Why? Because the story is long! And I choose to end it at verse 23 because.... well you read verse 24 for yourself.

Begin with an introduction of the person Daniel and gives examples of his discipline and integrity as a follower of God – and why it was important to him (gave him a sense of connection to his tradition and life story, and a framework to interpret and live life).

Give example of why rules are important especially when in dangerous circumstances: they give a framework of that will save your life. Can use rules for rock climbing or any other dangerous activity or occupation. Rules help us negotiate life.

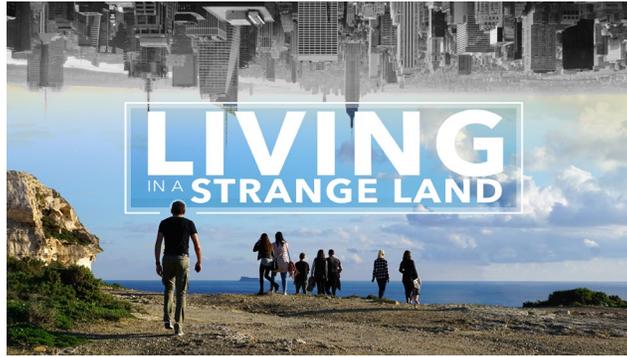
Many persons have developed personal rules for living to achieve the same Daniel wanted to achieve – maintain discipline and integrity to the values he held dear. Find an example. You might have a personal experience or you might find something interesting from a TED talk or story you might have read. You may want to consider a powerful testimony of a contemporary Daniel.

I will use the story of my personal experience of being in the audience of a talk given by Lou Holtz, former head football coach at Notre Dame and motivational speaker, (I like football) where I first heard Lou’s 3 rules for living: Do what is right; Do the best you can; and Show people you care. I will talk about their impact on me at a time when I needed it.



I will then tell folks that we have three rules too – three rules for living credited to John Wesley – a framework for us to follow: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Making them a daily mandate during these days is important to helping us maintain a steady straight path that yields a sense of calm and order in a world turned upside down. We become non-anxious – which is not only the thing we need but is our best testimony of faith to our neighbors in these days.

Closing thought: how you want to weave the isolation referenced in the title is up to you....I have to think about it more.



Week 4: Living in Community | Nehemiah 6

What difference nine months makes... ask any mother or father... video... / examples/ interviews
Life changes in those nine months

***Nine months was the time period that encompasses Nehemiah getting the report and the wall being completed.

Intro: The people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem were in a terrible condition. Over 150 years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar and the armies of Babylon had invaded Israel and had carried many of the people away as slaves. The Jews desperately needed someone who had the vision and the determination needed to restore Jerusalem and Israel to her former glory. They needed someone who was different. They needed someone who had been captured by God and was set on fire by His Spirit. They needed a person of vision if they were going to see their situation changed. God had such a man! His name was Nehemiah and he was being prepared by God as a vessel to be used in a great way to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and to bring about the restoration of the nation of Israel.

You and I may be thousands of years removed from the time of Nehemiah, but we also live in a time that desperately needs strong committed people of God who will not be deterred. It is clear to all that the church in our day is a mere shell of its former self. The walls of separation between the church and the world have been torn down. Being thrown out of our buildings has allowed us the chance to break down some isolating walls and build walls of God's love around people's hearts to be the church that Jesus commissioned after his resurrection.

God needs people of that will not be deterred in the face of opposition in building the kingdom of God!

Body: Answered critics by calling on God - 6:9

Nehemiah called on God to vindicate himself when the enemies stepped up their attacks. He asked God to strengthen his hands and his resolve to carry out the task God had called him to. Then the community came together and finished the wall!

Strong Leadership plus God's Power plus Community creates a powerful kingdom witness!

Faced with opposition, we must see the convergence of two great streams of power for the accomplishment of this monumental task. To speak of one without speaking of the other would be to miss much of the point of the book. For us to say that the completion of the wall project is testament to the leadership of Nehemiah and the determined efforts of the people would be true enough and yet incomplete. We cannot speak of the people's work without acknowledging the power of God moving through them. At the same time, to speak of the power of God without acknowledging that God chooses to use obedient people to accomplish his tasks would be to miss a key point as well. All through the book of Nehemiah we see these two streams converging: the hand of God sovereignly guiding, and the joint, determined effort of His people which seizes upon a God-given vision and will not be denied its accomplishment.



1. God's power:

Summarize God's provision and direction: Review the story and clarify Nehemiah's continued direction from a God who listens and cares for God's people. (fast, prayer waiting for the opportune time approach the king)

- **Nehemiah's Strength as a leader**
- Focus on the trials and heartache of being opposed and the distractions of our soul when opposed. Psalm 42 or other psalms help us to focus on God and to remember God's sovereign love and his past faithfulness to remain strong in the tasks ahead. (Doing church differently is an excellent example for standing strong)
- Nehemiah's wise response to Sambaliet and Tobiah verse 8, 10,11-13: (When we come to the last portion of Nehemiah 6, there are at least a couple of themes you could focus on. We notice that, even in the face of the completion of the project, the opposition continues. We learn here that Tobiah has inside connections and uses them masterfully in a continuing effort to undermine the leadership and credibility of Nehemiah.) Hmmm! Fear creates the need to oppose. speak to the fear!
- Community response The wall was finished

Emphasize two verses, verses 15 and 16, because they point us to a miracle that God worked how a group of dispirited people rallied together behind a God-ordained leader to accomplish an incredible feat in the face of opposition .

Ending: The Power of a God, of Testimony of Community and the determination of godly leadership

Three Truths nobody can deny in the miracle of the wall:

Nobody who looks at the situation with unbiased eyes can deny The Power of God operating here. The accomplishment of this project can rightly be called a miracle, given the circumstances we understand. Miracles come from the power of God and when God works, we had better be careful to give to him the glory that is rightly due His Name!

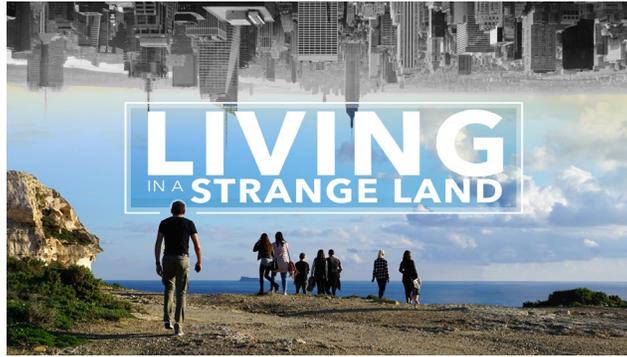
Take the Word with you:

- What is your next step in Godly leadership in your family, your church, your neighborhood and your community (helping in communicating the needs of the "other" in regathering rather than your own?)
- Share a God size story that you have witnessed.
- You are part of a community. How can you build walls of protection around the marginalized and the least? (Service)

COVID-19:

Satan said to God. I rejoice that every one of your churches is now closed.

God: I rejoice that I have opened a church in every home!



Week 5: Living in New Places | Acts 8:1-8; 11:19-26

We're not the first people to find ourselves living in a strange land. But wherever we are living, God is working. As disciples of Jesus, how do we learn to live in this land from those who have been here before us? Persecution sent the early disciples into new communities. C-19 can send the church into new communities where God is already preparing the soil for harvest. Acts 8:1-8; 11:19-26

Intro: Share a personal account of moving into a new community. As a pastor, we've all moved into new communities. And one of the things we discover when we move into a new community is that God has already been preparing the soil in us and in others.

Body: COVID-19 moved all us into a Strange Land. Share some common emotions, experiences everyone has encountered. Lock-down, home-schooling, wearing masks, etc.

There is a lot of unknown in this strange land. We'd all prefer to stay where we are comfortable and know the territory. But at times, we need something to move us out of the ordinary rhythms we've grown accustomed to in our life. And, if we welcome this disruption and open our eyes, we may be able to see that God is preparing something new- in us and through us.

The persecution of the disciples moved them out of Jerusalem. (That was Jesus intention anyway, see Acts 1:8) Jerusalem was where they were comfortable, it was a 'known' in their lives. But God wanted them to spread the Good News.

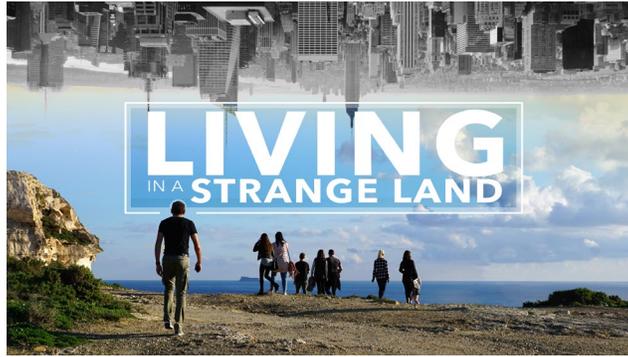
In our previous weeks, living in a strange land often came about as result of Exile- God's punishment upon the nation of Israel. And some tend to see negative experiences, like COVID-19, as God's punishment. But what if God used this persecution to break the disciples out of their complacency and send them where they weren't ready to go? Acts 8:4 "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

[Depending on time, you can cover some of the accounts in Acts 8 – 11. This includes the Good News being received by the Gentiles]

Moving into a strange land is our opportunity to partner with God in 'preaching' the Good News in new ways and new places.

Remember John Wesley was hesitant to abandon the church for the 'vile' preaching in the streets. But it set up a revolution that became our spiritual heritage. (See this article: <https://revlarryfrank.com/2020/04/26/the-vile-opportunity-of-covid-19/>)

The disciples probably didn't embrace their persecution as an invitation to spread the Good News. And we never would have imagined that being the church apart from our buildings would generate new opportunities for sharing the Good News.



But we've done things that we probably never imagined doing before COVID-19. [Share how your church has lived into this strange new land by spreading the Good News in New Ways.]

So what opportunities is God inviting you to engage in? [Share some examples of how individuals in your church have responded to opportunities in this season.]

Are you willing to see this 'season' as fertile ground that God has prepared for you to plant, cultivate and harvest?

Ending: Imagine what the world would be like today if the disciples had never left Jerusalem?

But they did! And because they did, the church grew and expanded. The Good News went to the 'ends of the earth' because of what most people saw as a negative experience.

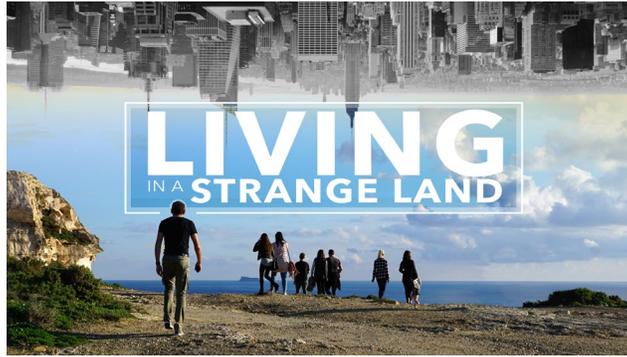
But we can embrace this season as fertile ground for God to do something new!

[Share a common vision for your church moving forward.]

Pray that God will open your eyes to see this season as an opportunity for you to 'preach the word' wherever you go.

[Share common ways that people can 'preach' in their circumstances.]

This Strange Land may end up being God's push for the church to explore new places and new people to engage with the Good News.



Week 6: Living in a New Kingdom | 1 Peter 2:9-12; Philippians 3:20-21

God's people build the kingdom of heaven here and now, transforming the world with the light of Christ.

Intro: Share about your hometown and what makes it unique or quirky. Are there yearly festivals, special “mom and pop” shops, or regional dialects that are popular and distinct? Explain how these cultural traits can set us apart from others wherever we may live.

Body: Food carries our cultural identity. Our eating habits reflect our lifestyle. Curry and spices mark Indian food. Fresh vegetables and crisp peppers are unique to Middle Eastern breakfast tables. And fish is incredibly popular throughout Asia. What foods set your town apart? Though we may not realize it, foods help bring a taste of home while also mixing into the local culture. In the US, Chinese food, Pizza, and Perogies may have international roots, but they have become distinctly American. This is one way we transform the world around us.

In today's two passages, Peter and Paul use the language of citizenship to remind the church of their cultural identity. Though they live under pagan Roman rule, they are culturally Christ followers and citizens of heaven.

The Church in Philippi would have easily understood this concept. In 42 BC, when Julius Ceaser was assassinated by Brutus and Cassius, Marc Antony and Octavian set out to get revenge. They caught up with them at Philippi. There some 200,000 troops faced off and the conspirators were defeated. After the battle, Marc Antony and Octavian knew the danger of bringing 100,000 idle soldiers back to Rome and instead settled them in Philippi, granting them Roman citizenship and making it a Roman colony. Although most of the soldiers and few of the residents had never been to Rome, that made them no less Roman. The city quickly flourished with all the trappings of Roman.

Likewise, God calls us to expand the kingdom of heaven to the communities in which we live. Though none of us nor our neighbors have ever been to heaven, we have the ability to greatly influence the culture around us. To be a citizen of heaven means that you are a representative of heaven. (Philippians 3:20) Paul's use of the word “priest” comes from the Latin “bridge builder”. As a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), our job is to build bridges between the secular world and the Kingdom of Heaven.

Too often our focus is on what we lack. We long to be in the heavenly realms. We don't stop to consider how we might build the kingdom here. Open your eyes and stop feeling sorry for yourself. You are a citizen of heaven. You are marked by the Holy Spirit! You have the ability to bring heaven to earth! Transform your world!

Ending: How different might this world be if we stopped chasing and started building? What are the little things you do every day that set you apart as a child of God and how can that transform someone's life? Is it helping to feed a family? Is it showing patience to someone who struggles to speak English? Is it fighting for justice for others, even to your own detriment? Take the time today to jot down five characteristics you believe are most important in the kingdom of heaven and then prayerfully consider how you can advance one of those here and now.