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April 19, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A      1 Peter 1:1-9

*Ask children to send in photos of them with “their people,” like a family, a team, a group of friends, etc. Make sure it’s OK that everyone in the photo gives permission to be on a video that will be on the internet.*

To kids: Thanks for sending in your pictures!

- These are “your people” the ones you care about, rely on, and who rely on you.
- *Describe the kinds of groups represented.*
- How did you get connected with those people?
  - Born into a family
  - Invited to be part of a group of friends
  - Signed up for a team, placed on a team by a coach etc.
  - Common interest—music, sport, etc.

Today our scripture passage begins by telling the readers of this letter that they are God’s people. The way Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase of the Bible called, “The Message” the writer, Peter, says he is “writing to exiles scattered to the four winds.” In other words, this letter is for Christians who live in many different places. It’s likely that this letter was copied and sent out to people who believed in and worshiped Jesus, but they didn’t live near to very many other Christians. They felt isolated or separate or just plain disconnected to the Christian community.

We can relate to that these days, can’t we? We are missing “our people.” I know the kids who play spring sports are missing their teammates. (Refer to the pictures sent in.) I was supposed to go to Washington for my granddaughter’s birthday in May, and not knowing when I’ll be able to see her and her family again makes me miss them even more.

Peter reminds us that in addition to the groups of people we belong to, that we also belong to God. No matter where we are or who we are with, we are always God’s people because God chose us and brought us into a community with others who love and follow Jesus.

But living as God’s chosen people isn’t always easy. There are times when the world around us makes it hard to live as people of faith. Sometimes as God’s people our faith in God’s love and power is tested, or challenged.

Now, in this Covid-19 situation you may have experienced a testing of your faith. It’s not that God has given us this virus to test us and see if we can remain faithful. Suffering of any kind is not from God. Suffering and trouble are a normal part of human life. But these troubles can either turn us toward God, and the hope we have through Jesus Christ, or they can overwhelm us.

The people who first received Peter’s letter were trying to live out their faith in Jesus in a world that didn’t understand who Jesus was or what it meant to hope in God’s promised future of new life. We live in a country where living as a Christian is fairly common.

But in times like we are living in now, or maybe when you have experienced other traumas, it takes faith to cling more closely to God's grace and the hope we have because of Jesus' resurrection.

The troubles of the world can give us an opportunity to tell others about our faith in God to do amazing things! Will we speak to our faith in challenging times? Or will we keep our faith to ourselves?

The testing of our faith also happens when we do decide to give witness to Christ. Even though Christianity is fairly dominant in our society, it does not hold the place of respect it once did just a few decades ago. More and more, people are questioning the relevance of faith in a God who would die on a cross. They wonder how Christians can have hope when the signs around us give more reasons for despair.

Our faith is tested when we are questioned and challenged about what we believe about Jesus and what his death and resurrection mean to us. Peter talks about this like gold that is refined in a fire.

I like how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: "Pure gold put in the fire comes out of it *proved* pure; genuine faith put through this suffering comes out *proved* genuine." Each challenge we face is an opportunity for God's power and presence to burn off our self-centered tendencies to rely on own will and power and to reveal a deep and abiding faith that trusts in the promise of life beyond suffering and death.

The opening to this letter to Christians, whether we are fully supported in community or feeling thrown to the four winds, encourages us to rejoice—to give praise to God who has given us a new birth in our baptisms. And with that birth we have received a living hope.

This week I had the joy of talking with each of our confirmation youth about what they experienced in the Holy Week worship services. One thing that stood out for us was the Good News that sin and death doesn't get the last word. No matter what happens to us or around us, God is all about bringing forth new life and we can trust in that promise with hope, because Jesus took on the sin of the world, entered into death, and came through it victorious in his resurrection.

In this time of separation as a congregation, Peter's letter calls us to remember that we still have our people who share a common faith and trust in Jesus Christ. God's people are our people, chosen, loved, and strengthened in faith—even and especially in trying times. Let us find ways to share our faith with one another and with the world, rejoicing in the promises of the resurrection, promises for new life and a living hope.

Thanks be to God! Amen