

Rev. Lynne Ogren
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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
6th Sunday of Easter, Year B Acts 10

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

This morning I'd like to spend some time exploring and explaining the Faithful Innovations process some of our Zion members have been involved with over this past winter. This is a timely emphasis for the congregation as you begin a season of reflection and seeking God's vision for your future together. And I promise it will tie in to our readings for today.

Faithful Innovations is a process developed at Luther Seminary and has been used by congregations all over the country. It reminds me a lot of the small-town initiative Lewistown participated in about six years ago that led to the Make It Happen projects like the skatepark and the new amphitheater venue by Central Feed Grilling.

Faithful Innovations is an appropriate title. We want to be faithful to the callings we have from God, and as the world continues to change, the church must look for innovative ways to follow those callings.

It is a process grounded in our faith that God is present and active in our lives, in our congregation, and in our community. Every step of the process includes dedicated time to the practice of Dwelling in the Word. The team has used various Bible passages to learn to listen for what God might calling us to do or to be in this place and time. As we listen for God's voice and guidance in scripture, we are then sent out to listen to God's voice around us.

The first phase of the process is to notice where God is at work to bring healing and wholeness and hope to the world. This phase means looking at our church and community settings with new eyes. The Faithful Innovations team from Zion have been engaging people in conversations to listen for God's presence and activity in their lives.

They have been asking questions like "When have you felt close to God? When have you felt most spiritually alive?" They have discovered that often it is in times of crisis or struggle that people have experienced the love and presence of God most clearly. People also feel spiritually alive as they experience the beauty of creation or the birth of a child or other times of joy. And our team has been surprised at how willing others have been to share their stories!

The circle of noticing God's active presence moves from individuals to what God is up to here in our congregation and then beyond to the wider community. This involves asking questions like:

Who worships here or who lives here?

Who is served in our church or community?

What's happening that we might see as God's action as much as our own?

But it also means noticing those who are sifting through the cracks. Last week our BLAST kids held a tea and they invited some of our high school kids to come—and a few of them did! We often lament that our high school youth don't come to church much after Confirmation, but have we done our best to invite and include them?

In Lewistown we've been hearing about the housing shortage, both for buying and for renting. We might wonder together: Who are the people looking for a place to live and can't find anything safe or affordable—or even available? Are there places that could provide housing but need fixing up? Is anyone working on this problem?

After some time of noticing and asking questions and listening—both to God and to others—the second phase of Faithful Innovations is to experiment. These don't need to be major overhauls of current programs or practices, or complicated programs to invent. The invitation to our high schoolers was one of those experiments.

We begin with simple tweaks to things we are already doing that reach out to those we've noticed are not being included or engaged or served. It means looking just beyond the walls of “the way we've always done” things to imagine and try something new, reaching out to those who are longing to experience the grace and power of God as we have.

This is what Peter experienced in the reading from Acts today. Peter had been given a clear message from Jesus before he and the other disciples were sent out to carry on the mission of the gospel. At the end of John's gospel, Jesus commissions Peter to shepherd his people. “Feed my lambs and tend my sheep,” he said.

So, of course, for Peter, that meant God's people, the people of Jewish heritage, who had descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These were Jesus' people and Peter's people, who else would be the sheep of the Good Shepherd?

I wanted to read the whole of Acts, chapter 10, which we have skipped in recent weeks, so we could get a sense of this short passage assigned for today.

Peter is sent to Cornelius, who is not only a Gentile, meaning NOT of Jewish heritage, but he is also a Roman centurion, a soldier who has pledged allegiance to the Roman government. But, we're told Cornelius is also a man of faith, a believer in the God of Israel, who offers to God prayers and alms—which is an act of repentance.

Both Cornelius and Peter experience visions and receive messages from God that bring them together. Peter is very clear that this is not the norm. The laws of Scripture forbid eating with Gentiles or any association with them, including staying in their homes.

By following the direction of the Spirit, Peter crosses boundaries and opens his heart up to seeing more than just his ethnic brothers and sisters as the sheep he has been given to care for by Jesus.

Just as the Holy Spirit came upon Peter and the other apostles on the Day of Pentecost, giving them the ability to speak in different languages to those from different parts of the world, now the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and the other Gentiles, too, gifting them with the ability to speak in other languages.

The act of baptism at the end of this chapter, welcomes them into the family of God without any qualifications. The Holy Spirit came upon them. God sent Peter to them. In this baptism, as with each of ours, it is God's work to bring us into community, to form us in faith, and to send us into the world to share the love and grace we have been given by God.

Adam and Amy Sallee will be baptized here today. God has been active and present in their lives already, and today as the water is poured and God's word is spoken, they will be named as children of God.

They will be called to their own paths of service, just as each of us serve God and the world in our own unique ways. In the community of this congregation, we will make a commitment to them to nurture their faith and to include them in our common mission of "bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."

Who else needs to hear God's message of love and acceptance?

Where might God be sending Zion Lutheran Church into the world?

Which boundaries are we being asked to cross?

How might we show the love of Jesus, a love that means laying down one's life for those who are longing to be seen and welcomed and given worth?

Our Faithful Innovations team would love to talk with you about all these questions and more! Monte Solberg, Lana Papp, Lori Ann Lutz, and Jamie Sura are on this team, but they need help. I invite you to join them in looking and listening for God's presence and calling in and among us and in the larger communities. Then try something new—something small or something significant!

How is God calling us to faithful innovation today?

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Alive in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring our prayers before God who promises to hear us and answer in steadfast love.

A brief silence.

Loving God, you call us to be your fruit-bearing church. Strengthen the bonds among all Christian churches, especially those in and around Central Montana and our Montana Synod, so that all people may be welcomed into Christian community. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Faithful Savior, you conquer the world not with weapons but with undying love. Plant your word in the hearts of the nations' leaders and give them your Spirit, so that the peoples of the world may live in peace. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Caring Healer, you forget no one and accompany the lonely. Provide for those needing homes or medical care and point us towards life-changing responses to these needs in our own communities. Be present with those who are sick or suffering, especially those listed in our bulletin today and those we name now in our hearts.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Gracious God, as a mother comforts her child, you comfort us. Bless mothers and mothering people in our lives. Comfort those who miss their mothers, mothers who grieve, those who grieve because they cannot be mothers, and those who have never known a loving mother. Guide women and men to care for the children in their lives with love and compassion.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Gentle Redeemer, all who die in you abide in your presence forever. We remember with thanksgiving those who shared your love throughout their lives. Keep us united with them in your lasting love. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

In the hope of new life in Christ, we raise our prayers to you, trusting in your never-ending goodness and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.