

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.

Our sermon text is based on the epistle reading 1 Peter 1:3-9

Let us pray,
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight; we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Who are you? Some people would answer that with their name. Our names identify us, it tells others of our ancestry, our nationality, where we are from and dare I say it, whether or not we are from a Lutheran family. You can take that information and plug it into an ancestry website, and you'll find out all kinds of things.

Some might answer with what they do, their job defines who they are, it tells us about their level of education, what skills and abilities they have.

Then again, others might answer by saying that they're a work in progress, knowing who they are is always changing. They're still working on that, defining that, shaping that. And, for some people, that is a process that never finishes.

In this morning's sermon text, St. Peter starts out by giving us quite a different answer to that question. He starts out by saying *"according to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"* In the opening of his letter St. Peter begins by reminding us that who we are is someone who has been born again. That this is your identity that is above all other identities: that you are a born again, baptized, child of God.

To you and I this may not sound surprising. But for the folks St. Peter was writing to, this reminder was critical. These were the first century Christians who were suffering, coming under persecution and who were scattered throughout the region. Who were forced from their homes and their work, whose futures were uncertain and for who life was quite difficult because they were unwilling to renounce their faith, but yet they were beginning to lose heart.

It is not hard to see why these folks began to lose heart while living in the face of this suffering. They began to doubt whether God still loved them or noticed their trouble or could do anything about it.

Likewise, seeing that we too are not immune to suffering in our lives. We need to recognise that it is easy for us to begin to lose heart too as we go through the long journey of our earthly lives.

As we live our lives, we face trials of various sorts; financial woes; employment concerns; illnesses; troubles in relationships; the death of loved ones and so many other difficulties that test our faith. These can bring with them a similar discouragement that the first century Christian may have felt. We too, begin to doubt whether God still loves us or notices our troubles or if can or will do anything about them.

St. Peter understands the Christian's bewilderment that God's sons and daughters are undergoing these kinds of suffering. Only too recently we heard how he himself had once shown only shock and horror at the idea of Jesus' suffering and death and that he had to be rebuked as though he were Satan himself (Matthew 16:23).

In the upper room on Maundy Thursday, we hear Jesus words to him: *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers"* (Luke 22:31, 32). St. Peter's experience of failure, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration uniquely qualified him to write to these struggling Christians. He'd been there and now writes this letter to help his brothers and sisters see that their painful trials are only temporary.

For us as Christians, we need to remember that we do not define who we are, and the world does not define who we are - Jesus does. And His definition and identity is a reality far greater than our name, our nationality, our work, or any other way we think of ourselves. We are the baptized. We are the children of our heavenly Father.

Now that means a number of things. First of all, St. Peter tells us, that even if you are homeless here on earth, you have a home, *"an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."* And that you, *"by God's power are being guarded through faith"* for life in that home. As Jesus told His disciples just before His crucifixion: *I will not leave you orphans* (John 14:18). Those who are born again as children of God are cared for by their Father, through Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. You're not on your own. God does not leave or forsake His children.

Part of the Father's care for us, one we struggle with, is trial or testing. St. Peter teaches us that we are put through trials and testing for the same reason precious metals are refined. Precious metals are put into the fire to burn off their impurities and make them even more pure and valuable. Likewise, you who are more precious than anything in this world, will be proved in the same way.

This is not a punishment, but is done in love, to release our hold on the things of this world, so that we cling to God alone. So that we do not hold on to our false gods and idols, but are set free from them to rejoice in Christ at His coming again, *obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

Therefore, St. Peter says, think this way, you are a baptised child of God, that this is who you are. Therefore do not define yourself as the world does, nor live as you used to live, but live a life of holiness, just as Christ is holy.

Usually when we think of holiness we think of sinlessness and perfection. And certainly we should strive daily to be like that - but as much as we try, we cannot achieve sinlessness nor perfection. At least, not by our own sheer will or determination or strength, and St. Peter knew that well. Here is the same man who was known for putting his foot in his mouth and messing up. He knew well that if we are sinless it is only because our sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus and forgiveness won for us by Christ's work on the cross. And if we are perfect, it is only because His perfection has been imputed to us. And seeing as this is true, it is the reason for our rejoicing, our reason for not losing heart, it is our living hope in this hostile world.

To be holy means to be set apart. By virtue of our baptism, by our being united to Jesus in His death and resurrection, we have been set apart from sin and death. We have been set apart from the world by being called into His body – the church. We have been set apart from our former ignorance by the enlightening of the Holy Spirit to be who we are – a child of Christ.

When we face times of persecution, times of dispersion, times of trouble, times of pestilence this reality does not change. This is the reality and foundation that will carry you through all the trials and temptations that come before you, and even through death itself, to life eternal with God.

Jesus said, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* (Matt 24:35) Jesus has given His word of promise, that we can believe in. His word shows us the grace He extended to us, His word carries the forgiveness of sin, His word is living and active and is working in you. It is His word that named you as His son or His daughter.

So to be holy is to live as one who has been set apart. To live as one who places their trust in Jesus and the events of Easter. To think differently, live differently, speak differently, act differently, value differently, and even die differently than the world around us.

As we read the Gospel accounts, this is what we see in Jesus, and it is what brought Him opposition all the way to death on the cross. And by the time of St. Peter's letter some of that was happening to the apostles and the Christians that he was writing to. And some this is still happening to Christians today.

But if you know who you are, then none of that really matters. For you, your future, and your home are safe in Christ. They are guarded by Him. That, of course, doesn't make it easy! Far from it. Sin, death and the devil are going to hound you every step of the way. And that's why St. Peter is writing to the Christians, not only of his day, but in all times and all places. He wants them to know that there is a greater reality than what is seen and felt.

He is reminding them, and you, that we are Christians living in an unchristian world, but that you are also living in Christ and that lives Christ in you. Therefore, no matter what this world brings upon you, you do not need to lose heart, rather you already have all the confidence and hope you will ever need. You are children of God, holy and precious to Him. You have no reason to be afraid rather, live in that truth, in that reality. Be holy, just as Christ is holy, for you.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen