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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series A)

June 1, 2014

Text: I Peter 4:12–16; 5:6–11

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter has always felt a little strange to me. It's the in-between Sunday, the Sunday between the celebration of the Lord's Ascension (which we observed this past Thursday) and Pentecost (which we will celebrate next Sunday).

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended to His majestic glory at the right hand of the Father where He rules over all creation for the benefit of His Church. Fifty days after the resurrection comes Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came upon the Church as evidenced by the rushing mighty wind, the tongues of fire appearing above the disciples' head, and the that miraculous speaking in previously unknown language. But today, the 44<sup>th</sup> day after Easter, ...well, it's just in-between.

But that's ok. For we live in the in-between time of this present age and the glory of the next. We live between the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, on the one hand, and His appearing in glory on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead, on the other. Sometimes we call this in-between time the "Last Days."

It must be said with all boldness, joy and confidence that in the midst of these Last Days, we are heirs of eternal life; we are filled with God's Holy Spirit; we long for the glory of the new creation. But we aren't there yet. Now is the time of vigilance, waiting, hoping, trusting, and walking by faith and not by sight.

This is the time of clinging to promises of God in Christ Jesus. But, I must tell you, there isn't much to look at and see with your natural, human eyes. These in-between days require hearing words preached from the mouths of sinful men, offering prayers even when heaven feels a trillion miles away, having water splashed upon you only with God's name, eating rather ordinary bread and wine with a promise that it gives eternal blessings, confessing sins and hearing them being forgiven, not from an

angel's voice, but from a man called by God through the Church to proclaim forgiveness and restoration.

This is the time of the Church, which must wait with patient endurance, rejoice in suffering, remain steadfast in sober watchfulness, faithfulness, and prayer. We are the assembly of the firstborn who declares the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. We are God's royal priesthood, His holy nation, His chosen people, His end times Israel.

Today's epistle reading from I Peter 4:12–19; 5:6–11 give some insight into what life is like in this in-between time. And we must know that our Lord does not promise that it will always be easy. We are contending with the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures.

The apostle Peter doesn't pull any punches, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (I Pe 4:12). Don't be surprised when people despise your Christian faith and resist it, sometimes violently. We Americans take it for granted that most people either respect or at least tolerate Christianity. But that isn't the case around the world. According to one trusted source, approximately 11 Christians suffering some form of martyrdom every hour worldwide (Touchstone May/June 2014 *More Sheep for Slaughter*). When I read that statistic, I was surprised although Scripture teaches that we shouldn't be.

How should we respond in the face of such opposition? Wilt away, hide and hope nobody notices us? Hardly. Peter continues, "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (vs. 13–14). Rejoice in the face of suffering, says Peter.

Not because of the suffering itself but because of your participation with Jesus. That's a message we aren't used to hearing. I'm not sure I've ever stood in this pulpit and encouraged you to rejoice in suffering for Jesus. But if we endure hardship because of Jesus, the Spirit of God rests upon us. In other words, Good Friday and Easter and the glory of the Last Day provide the framework to understand Christian suffering. As we walk with Jesus and participate in His suffering so we shall also participate in His glory on the Last Day, now by faith in this in-between time but fully and completely at the return of Jesus.

But Peter cautions us. The suffering he has in mind arises because of the name of Jesus, not our sinful nature. Vs. 15, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.” We Christians are called to live a life of faith and obedience to God’s Word including the 10 commandments. If we break the law, we should expect to suffer the consequences. Christianity doesn’t give us any exemptions from civil and legal authority. In fact, history records that when Christians were persecuted they often appealed to the ruling authority by saying that Christians were not lawbreakers or malcontents but good, faithful citizens who prayed for government and her leaders.

“Yet,” says Peter, “if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” If and when we are called upon to suffer for the name of Jesus, let us not be ashamed. And let us not be ashamed of our dear brothers and sisters around the world who suffer for the name of Jesus. Rather, let us uphold them in our prayers and support them by any means our Lord provides.

The Lord is already working judgment in the world, revealing to all who belongs to Him and who doesn’t. “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’” (vs. 17–18).

Just as He did with OT Israel, God makes an example out of His Church, showing mercy to the faithful remnant, showing His wrath on those who reject His gifts. And if judgment begins with God’s baptized believers, how will it go on with those who refuse to believe?

We mustn’t compromise with the desires of our sinful flesh, or with the works and ways of Satan, nor with the allurements of the world. By following such a life, we will find ourselves in conflict with sin and evil. Peter admonishes us by saying, “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good...” (vs. 19). During these in-between days, we believe that our heavenly Father is working all things in our lives for our good. That is the source of our boldness and confidence. My God loves me and does me good even when enduring suffering for His name sake or even when He disciplines me because of my sin. To Him, I entrust my soul. He will do me good.

The proper Christian attitude to all these things is humility. Peter continues, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (5:6–7). Humility is that God-given strength to know who you are and who He is and the ability to live according to that relationship.

Life in these Last Day calls for sober-minded watchfulness because “your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (vs. 8). We know that the devil is judged and defeated because of Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. Yet he preys upon Christians, primarily weak, isolated Christians who do not cling to God’s Word and Sacraments and the strength that comes through the holy fellowship found in Christ’s Church.

“Resist him,” says Peter, standing “firm in your faith” (vs. 9). These are the in-between days. We have not yet reached our final glory. Jesus will bring us safely home but for now, we are called to resist Satan, and stand firm in humble faith and godly confidence. If we must suffer for Jesus, our Lord will bring us through it and all the better for it. “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (vs. 10). You see, that’s our strength under pressure. The God of all grace HIMSELF will see to your needs in this in-between time. The same Jesus who overcame death and the grave will also HIMSELF sustain you. He has committed Himself to you. Through His Word and Spirit, we find Christ for us.

We need not be afraid of the present in-between time. Our eternal future is secure in Jesus. Because of Jesus, we stand victorious now and forever. “To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (vs. 11).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.