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**Weekend of Sunday, May 17, 2020**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A**  
**First Reading: Acts 1:6-14**  
**Second Reading: 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**  
**Gospel Reading: John 17:1-11**  
**Sermon Title: “Fiery Ordeal Lately?”**

## **Theme**

*Our faith in Christ does not make us immune from the scorn of others. Nevertheless, we are to resist the designs of evil when we experience disparagement from others because we trust God’s grace will strengthen and guide us.*

## **Text**

<sup>12</sup>Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup>But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup>If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

<sup>5:6</sup>Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. <sup>7</sup>Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup>Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup>Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. <sup>10</sup>And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup>To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

## Sermon

Speaking of the readings prescribed for the day, today is an interesting day. Last Thursday was the celebration of the Ascension of our Lord. That is the day that Jesus ascended back into heaven; a day that never gets enough attention, in my opinion, because Jesus' ascension affirms his incarnation. In other words, his return to heaven affirms that he came from heaven in the first place – which for those disciples, now apostles and that first generation of believers would have been a huge dose of encouragement even though he was absent from their presence in the way that he formerly was from that point on.

So if we would have read the First Reading from Acts 1 this morning we would have heard that story. I encourage you to read the first chapter of Acts yourself to refresh your mind on what I am talking about.

And the Gospel Reading for this morning, which I also did not read for you, is from John 17, again, part of the dialogue that Jesus had with his disciples on the night of his betrayal. It is his High Priestly Prayer in which he prays for the unity of his followers. In it he speaks of the glory he will give to his Heavenly Father through his own glorification on the cross.

I rarely preach on anything other than the Gospel Reading and that is because I never get tired of hearing and exploring the words of Jesus my Lord. But today is one of those exceptions because when I read the Second Reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter I thought, this passage was written for just such a time as this.

The author of the letter is, of course, Peter, yes impetuous Peter of disciple fame. He was one of Jesus' inner-circle and although John at least thought that he was "the one whom Jesus loved," Peter was the one whom Jesus put in charge of the fledgling Christian church after his Resurrection and before his Ascension. So we ought to pay attention to what he wrote.

The letter is considered a "pastoral epistle" meaning, it was written as an admonition and encouragement to pastors of the churches of Asia Minor for whom Peter had oversight.

But just because it is a pastoral epistle, don't think it has no bearing on your lives. As I said moments ago, I think this passage was written for just such a time as this.

Bible scholars think this letter was written around 81 AD and by that time Peter would have been very old and seasoned and as one of the few remaining original apostles still alive, he was held in high regard.

At the beginning of this passage, Peter wrote about a "fiery ordeal" that the Christian community somewhere in Asia Minor was dealing with. That "fiery ordeal" was the persecution of the Christians by just about every Gentile population they dealt with. As you can imagine, the rejection of the prevailing pagan way of behaving for a higher way of behaving was met with contempt and condescension.

So what does the persecution of our Christian ancestors have to do with us? I'm so glad you asked.

We are going through a "fiery ordeal" ourselves with this COVID-19 pandemic. We are not experiencing any persecution at the hands of other human beings intent on harming us. Our persecution is coming from an invisible enemy, a virus, but make no mistake, around the world it is killing thousands, sickening millions, and causing chaos in the economies of the countries of the world. The result is dissension among members of our own families and among the peoples of the world.

Last week I heard an NPR radio story entitled, "Houses of Worship Around the Country Are Struggling to Reopen." I emailed a link to it to you on Saturday. I would encourage you to listen to it because it pretty well identifies what I think is going on in the church today – and by the church, I don't mean the buildings, I mean the fellowships.

There are concerns expressed, laments offered, sadness spoke. Some or all of which you have or are probably feeling. One interviewee is a former Lutheran pastor who admits, he wonders where God is amid this pandemic. I don't know what Pr. Chadwick has gone through, maybe he has lost loved ones or endured and survived COVID-19 – I've heard it can be terrible. But from my perspective, it hasn't been terrible. I don't wonder where God is.

I can honestly tell you that I've led a blessed life. I've had my ups and downs, some of which I brought upon myself by my own actions; other times stuff just happened to me. I know my experience is not the same as yours, but through all my life's experiences, I've never questioned that God wasn't going through them with me – sometimes leading me, sometimes beside me, and sometimes dragging me – but always with me.

It takes a certain maturity of faith, tested by the “fiery ordeals” of life that build that kind of character into a person, to come to that awareness and conclusion. God knows it too, and so yes, we are tested from time to time. When those times of testing come along we should rejoice in them, yes, I said to rejoice in them because God thought enough of us to make yet another investment in us. And besides that, testing is an opportunity for us to grow in faith, and draw closer to God, so that we can give God glory through our suffering and not losing faith when we come out on the other side of our test.

Peter told his readers that they should face their "fiery ordeal" opportunities with humility. What I think that means for us is that anyone who thinks we'll get ourselves out of this pandemic is a fool. Right now, God is guiding the hands and minds of biomedical scientists around the world into bringing relief to the people of the world. And all along God has been inspiring the people of the world to do their best to relieve the suffering of others. I think God is well-pleased when he sees us doing godly deeds and acts of kindness for no self-serving purpose, just to be Jesus for another person. I have used these real-life true stories in the Occasional Word, an emailed product I've been sending out specifically to encourage you as we all go through our "fiery ordeal" together.

Peter wrote that as Christians we should cast all our anxiety on God because he cares for us. So let us do that. Relax, God's got this.

He wrote that we should discipline ourselves all the more so that we are not overwhelmed by our "fiery ordeal." Personally, I took the time of a slower schedule to grow deeper in my devotional life. Maybe you did too. There have been opportunities within this pandemic. Did you take advantage of them?

He wrote that especially in times of "fiery ordeal" we should stay steadfast in our faith, because the whole world is going through the same thing, and on the other side, God himself, will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us.

So we suffer a bit, or maybe even a lot. Through it, we grow in faith and deepen our relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ. You know God loves that.

And we get to do that among our brothers and sisters in faith, the members of our fellowship, where we encourage and lift one another up in prayer and do simple acts of kindness. I count it as a high honor to be the one who gets to come to you every day and every week to remind you of the sovereignty of God and to encourage you as we prevail against all enemies.

And when we get through to the other side and praise God for God's faithfulness, God will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us! That sounds pretty good to me.

In the radio article, one woman mentions that because she was not very active in her church and didn't attend very regularly anyway, the closure of her church has only pointed out to her that she hasn't really missed it. Well, I would argue, she *has* missed it, she has missed the point of church altogether.

She will still go through the same suffering we will – more or less, but without the love and concern of her Christian fellowship. And should she come out of it on the other side, and I sincerely hope she does, she'll probably think she managed her survival all by herself. "It wasn't that bad" she'll say. I don't know the woman or the state of her heart, only God knows that, but Peter ended this passage by reminding us that the God of all grace has planned for us to join him in eternal glory. I fear she will also miss that.

Zion will once again be open for worship in June. It will NOT be a return to normal. The worship services we are planning will be just about as *abnormal* a Lutheran service as I've ever been a part of. That is because worship is not about us; it is all about our God revealed in Jesus Christ. And so, we will humble ourselves and worship him the best way we can. Not because he saved us from COVID-19 – that remains to be seen, but because we already know he saved us for eternal life, and we trust that makes COVID-19 no match for him now.

Included in that June edition of Eye On Zion that I mentioned in the Announcements will be articles of encouragement from all your Council leaders, about whom I want you to know, have been thinking about you, about how they miss seeing you, and worshiping with you, and fellowshiping with you, and serving God and our community with you. All to encourage you to stay connected with your Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through his church. Zion Lutheran Church.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

So pay attention to the news coming out of Zion. All the necessary details to re-open our doors for worship, fellowship, and service will soon be revealed. But listen carefully, you should stay home if you have a compromised immune system or underlying health issues or are on the list of people our civil leaders recommend should stay home and not feel bad about it.

God revealed in Jesus Christ still loves you. He knows you love him too. I love you and the fellowship loves you. There will likely be a time when it is safer for you to come back. We'll see you then.

### **Prayer**

O God of grace and glory, your Son Jesus Christ suffered for us, died and was raised, and ascended to his rightful place at your right hand. Unite us with him and each other in suffering and in joy, that all the world may be drawn into your bountiful presence, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen