**Sermon 1 Peter 3:13-22 (Easter 6A)**

When I go back to visit my parents and family, it isn’t long before old family photos appear. They get pulled out from shoeboxes, manila file folders and even loose from a kitchen drawer. In fact, Sloane has been subjected not just to photos but VHS tapes of my grandparents in their younger years, single-digit birthday parties, and Christmases with folks in tight perms, square shoulder pads, and puffy sleeves. Stories abound, and arguments about which year something happened, and who that guy that looks like your great-uncle might be in grainy, sepia prints. Then the stories and the debates begin to extend beyond the photographed years, and we pull out Ancestry.com or the genealogy that my 2nd cousin-twice-removed on my mom’s side put together and distributed amongst the whole family connection. Many families do this. For some, the memories are more painful than joyful. And, at least in my family, connections are made not just with the enviable character-traits inherited from distant relatives, but (it turns out) hot-tempers, short-fuses and a tendency to interrupt are all genetic as well.

My mother is skilled in making connections between family members that were little more than strangers, if they ever met at all. Seeing similarities in the way someone walks, a turn-of-phrase, the shape of someone’s forehead, or a certain gesture. Mothers can be good at that, ‘putting us in our place,’ by which I mean setting our lives, our very existences, in context. The fact is, that we human beings are always part of something bigger than just ourselves. We are, who we are, because of where we have come from, who we have come from, what we have overcome, or worked to undo. Moms, mother-figures and mothering people of all kinds powerfully mold us into the people we become. They provide for us, worry about us, fear for us, support us, catch us when we fall. Irritate the heck out of us, but inevitably shape our self-understanding, our self-esteem, our ability to know who we are and what kind of ‘stuff’ we’re made of.

As we near the end of our series on the First Letter of Peter –this circular letter sent to multiple church communities in Asia Minor, to persecuted non-Jewish Christians, filled with doubt and fear under the threat of harassment– Peter takes his cue from the Almighty, Mother-like God as he attempts to set these fledgling congregations on firm ground. Like a mother, praying for their child’s growth into independence, he presents to them their spiritual lineage. And he does so, so that they might know exactly who they are, what they are connected to and what they are capable of in the near and now, no matter what the world may throw at them.

Peter wrote to encourage them in the midst of their suffering. We have shared this core purpose, every time we’re approached a new passage each week. And so we’re going to take a little bit of time again to review the chapters we’ve already covered. Peter opens his letter by greeting these churches as the “chosen people of God” who are exiled around the world (1:1-2), and although these Christians he’s writing to are Gentiles, he describes them with phrases from the Old Testament that describe: how God chose the people of Israel, the family of Abraham who was himself an exile and wanderer. He sets their lives in context. He’s showing them the family scrapbook. This is a key strategy that Peter repeats through the whole letter. He wants these suffering non-Jewish Christians to see that through Jesus they now belong to the family of Abraham. [PAUSE] This is a mothering strategy. And so, they are wandering exiles just like the patriarch Abraham, misunderstood. They’re mistreated, and they’re looking for their true home, a place of freedom and security just like their spiritual ancestors.

In the body of the letter (1:13-2:10), he continues to take even more memorable Old Testament images about the family of Israel and then he applies them again, to these Gentile Christians. So…

* like the Israelites who left Egypt, they too are to gird up their loins and leave behind their former way of life as that seek to live the Jesus-way of life.
* They are the “holy people of God” now who are journeying through a different kind of wilderness.
* They are the “people of the new exodus” who have been redeemed by the Jesus’ death, who’s the ultimate Passover lamb.
* They are “the people of the New Covenant” who have the Spirit of the Divine residing deep inside them, restoring their hearts, and renewing their minds.
* They are “the new temple” built on the foundation of Jesus himself, and
* “they’re the new kingdom of priests” who are serving God as representatives to the nations.

And by applying all of these amazing images to these persecuted Gentile Christians, Peter is placing their very existence, as well as their current suffering within a brand-new story. He shows them the family resemblance, he reminds them of the resilience and strength their ancestors had. And he says, this is who you are.

And isn’t that what a mom, a loving parent and compassionate leader does? And might that be what a loving and compassionate community of faith does, when people come through these doors feeling beaten up by all that the world has doled out on them? Peter gives these Gentile Christians experiencing hardship and persecution a historical perspective, but a perspective that sets them firming within a loving family. A chosen family rather than a blood-family, but one that reminds them of their beloved-ness, their chosen-ness. And that they are God’s very own.

It’s like showing up at a family gathering only to have someone say, “You know, your great great grandmother would be so proud of you.” Or “You never met Aunt Martha, but she had a sharp wit as well.”

I want us to sit, and really appreciate what Peter is attempting to do for these hurting people in this short letter. And how he was able to offer hope, and give meaning to these small and vulnerable communities, scattered throughout modern day Turkey, suffering persecution. And not just because our author uses family language and it happens to be Mother’s Day, but because we are living at a time of great loneliness, of great stress and anxiety, of fear, isolation and aimlessness, hopelessness… and the way that Peter chooses to encourage them is to connect them to a story that spans the very timeline of human existence. To God’s story.

And it works, I know it works because knowing who you are, being allowed to explore your heritage, your roots, matters. Being able to feel connection, or affinity for, someone you have never met, is life-giving. It can give us exactly what we need to face the challenges of our own lives. It can help us accept our inherent worth, and embrace our purpose within God’s bigger story, bigger vision for how life COULD be lived, in this broken world.

In today’s passage Peter returns again to the example of Christ and Jesus’ experience of suffering as encouragement that they are not walking this path alone. The life of Jesus provides the foundation from which they are to base their actions in this life. Along with the ancient connections with the Israelite people and the patriarchs on Judaism. The life of Jesus is to be the wider context in which they are to understand themselves and their continual witness to resurrection hope in the world. The way they are to live, though it may be through suffering, will make them a powerful sign of Christ (4:16) and this new Kingdom, this new way-of-being that is characterized by life, joy, peace and goodness. This whole letter assumes that these Christians would repeatedly find themselves in situations where they could be harassed and abused without having done anything to provoke such hostility. In verse 13, we see a striking phrase -that appears only here in the New Testament- to describe their commitment to the Jesus-Way: Peter calls them, “zealots for the good” (v.13b). That zeal-for-the-good is to be the trait that connects them to Christ’s experience and God’s story.

The zeal-for-the good, is our heritance too, should we embrace. Followers of the Jesus-Way are constantly challenged to go beyond simply keeping to themselves and trying to avoid tensions with outsiders. We are to be actively engaged on the side of what is good. Part of that engagement involved giving an explanation to any who ask about our faith (v.15b-16a). This is much more than trying to ‘be right,’ or win an argument, or stump our inquirer. Instead, our explanation of our faith must be more than just speech. In verse 14, “what is right” translates the Greek word *dikaiosyne*, ‘righteousness,’ or ‘justice.’ Our explanation of our faith must come through how we act in this world. Such that, someone may say, “I’d recognize that walk anywhere.” But instead of staying, “That’s a Loane-walk, a Caldwell-walk, or a Johnson-walk, or a Neat-walk,” they’ll be staying that’s a Jesus-lookin’ walk if I ever did see one.

Finally, Peter introduces the image of baptism near the end of our passage today. Baptism is an image, a symbolic ritual that at its core is an invitation. An invitation to see ourselves as marked as God’s beloved, as transformed by that love, and as raised up to be part of a movement characterized by love. This practice that had those entering the Christian church, plunge into the water –not to remove dirt from their bodies, the dirt that gathers and sticks to all of us as we move through this broken and messy world – but as, Peter says, as an “appeal to God for good conscience,” or as another translator has put it, “baptism now liberates you—not as a removal of dirt from the body –but as way to remain “mindful of God’s will.” And so, we rise up out of the waters, refreshed and ready to take our place in God’s family, in God’s story, and for the sake of justice.

We have one more week with this little New Testament letter, Rev. Dr. Tyler Mayfield will be concluding our series before we reach Pentecost Sunday on May 28. The day when we celebrate the birth of the church, the day where we reflect on our own church community, where we remember the people and stories of this place. Stories that inform our own identity, provide foundation for the ongoing witness of this justice-seeking community of faith.

And so today, I urge you to rest in the same assurance that Peter gave his readers, you are loved by God, you are chosen by God. You are resilient in ways you have yet to discover. You are grafted, adopted into a vast family that connects you with the ancients, and extends far beyond bloodline, and far beyond these walls. As you leave here today may someone observe your way-of-being in the world, and recognize the family resemblance. Not just something in the way you walk, or laugh. But in the way you are ‘zealous for the good.’

Amen.