

HL, 4 S in Lent, Laetare_032220, Mt. Calvary, Omaha, NE

Submitted by Rev. Jeffrey W. Duncan, Laetare, 03-22-20

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

The traditional color of Lent is ... PURPLE. However, looking around the Chancel today there is a striking change! It is the color...ROSE.

Today, we are exactly 21-days away from the great joy of celebrating the empty tomb. Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands. The ruin that is sin, that which wrought us into bondage, pain, sorrow, and even death itself has been and continues to be on our minds and in our devotions. It is a wearying work to make confession of all that is bad within us. For the last 25-days, this exhausting work of self-examination and repentance has been our cadence.

The purple of the Penitential Season of Lent has driven our eyes to the Cross, the place where the Son of God accomplishes our salvation. We surely deserve to die. In anguish we consider our many and great sins; those we wear by nature as well as those we commit with the full acquiescence of our will. Though we are right to expect it, death is not poured out upon us! Instead, Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" It is Jesus, not us, who is stricken, smitten, and afflicted by God. The cross is our viewpoint to watch God pouring out His wrath upon the Son He loves, in our place! This the Son willingly accepts. Jesus pleads for our forgiveness, not His. Jesus surrenders His last weakened breath committing His soul unto His Father's hands in total submission to that Father's will. John's proclaimed Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world hangs spent in death – for us!

"Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her, rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance." (Isaiah 66:10-11)

This is what we are a mere 21-days from celebrating – again! We can see it coming towards us. It's just around the corner. Our days spent contemplating our sorrow and suffering are nearly spent. The fear and trembling of the women who rose early that first Sunday morning following the Crucifixion was real. They arrived in bewilderment to an empty tomb. The angel greets them and calms their fears, yet shares a strange message: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. But go tell His disciples and Peter!" That fear was soon replaced with pure joy; the greatest of rejoicing! "Mary!" Jesus said. Turning, Mary could now see that the One she mistook for a gardener to be the resurrected and living Lord! **He is not dead!** He lives – and because He lives, we too will live. The sins that weighed us down are released! The wrath that we deserved to suffer was poured out on another. Jesus took away our shame, sorrow, and guilt. **We are redeemed!** O, great day of rejoicing! The victorious Lamb of God who was slain, now lives!

Laetare – It's Latin for "Rejoice!" Today is a respite in the midst of our sorrows. Liturgical traditions allows for Rose Color vestments, for flowers upon the Altar, even for Ceremonies of Marriage – things usually refrained from including during Penitential Seasons.

Israel in Moses day knew of a respite among their suffering. Released from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, God lead them by Moses into the dessert. But human nature as it is, sinful hearts were so quickly exposed! One might think that after 430-years of back-breaking work under their task-masters whip, Israel might not so easily long to return to Egypt. Yet here they are, maybe halfway into their journey to be blessed by God at Mt. Sinai as His long desired object of affection; a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. But now their stomachs grumble and their mouths join the chorus; ***"Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*** (Ex. 16:3b)

We know how the story goes, right! This lack of faith and trust in the good intentions of a loving God is met with **immediate punishment**. Israel is destroyed by a righteous God in an instant, never to be heard from again; right? **WRONG!**

God hears their grumbling. God listens to their pleas and He provides. He does not give them what they deserve – a swift kick you know where and to be tossed out into the wilderness to wander alone, starving, with no home or hope for a future. Incredibly, unexpectedly, God acts for their good instead. God feeds, nourishes, cares for and provides even more than an ungrateful people can imagine! Manna and quail – so much that they can't even gather it all, lest it spoil in disuse. It's an answer to prayer and it's a gracious outpouring in abundance. A loving God provides everything His rescued children need, though they deserve none of it.

Is this not a tremendous reason to REJOICE? And, is this not exactly what we ought consider today – we who cry out in our wilderness of today plagued by pestilence, uncertainty, and disillusionment. Our sinful nature expresses its own fears through our own grumbling to God;

“Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord, back when America was great! Then we sat next to the sidelines of our favorite sporting event, eating popcorn, hotdogs and Dippin Dots. But now you have brought us this pestilence to kill our whole community for lack of snack foods, toilet paper, and cleaning supplies!”

Fear and uncertainty abound. We judge the fragility of our life situations; Jobs, income, savings, store supplies and the sense of another shoe to drop yet tomorrow! Conversation turns quickly to 'getting used to our new normal'. Social distancing creates feelings of intense dis-ease. And even our actions and gatherings become subject to government and health agency quotas who only try to stop the spread of the disease, regardless of how they intrude upon our regular and expected freedoms of assembly and autonomy.

Israel lacked faith that God knew what He was doing in their present tumultuous situation. Is a lack of faith the similar distrust that has crept into our thoughts because of our sinful nature today? Questions cross our mind: Does God really know what He is doing allowing us to endure what are arguably the most trying and terrifying days that most of us have ever faced in our lifetime? Or, has the devil so effectively used media hype to drive a wedge between the faith that grasps and holds onto God's gracious promises and the God who actually delivers those promises in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus for us! Either way, it is this faith that sits at the epicenter of the war for our hearts and minds. Is God good? Does He remember His children? Will He hear our cries and prayers? Will He even hear our sinful rages against Him? And if He does hear, how will He react? Does He desire to act in our favor? Is it God's desire to deliver us from all forms of famine and pestilence? Will He really not allow any harm or danger to overtake us?

Moses was not the last servant of the Lord to experience grumbling and concern over the providential care of God for His people. Our disciples give evidence of their lack of faith in how God provides for the needy in today's Gospel. Large crowds have followed the One doing miraculous things. They sought Him to provide healing, comfort, and release from all their afflictions of body, mind, and soul. Jesus does what we have come to expect Jesus to do; He has compassion and provides comfort and healing! Jesus provides! Jesus provided so much comfort and aid that His work-day was well spent. Now the people are miles from home, miles from regular centers of commerce, and they are without daily bread. Here is where the disciples reveal their weakness of faith and trust in God's providential care and support. When asked how the crowds will be fed, they say:

⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?”

Have the disciples not been in the presence of the One who turned water into wine to retain the honor of the wedding party family? Is not Jesus the One who teaches with authority, not like that of their scribes and teachers? Hasn't Jesus cast out demons, rebuking them into silence about all they know of His true identity and mission? Are not the wind and the waves subject to Jesus' very commands? At His command, do not the lame walk again; the deaf hear the sound of birds chirping again; the blind look upon the evening sunset beauty ... again? In the hands of the One who rained down quail and manna in such abundance that two million Israelites could eat in the wilderness for forty years – are five loaves and two fish too little? Is the One who preaches that the kingdom of God is near a liar? For if the kingdom and glory of God are near, then He cannot be so unaware and so unconcerned with the daily needs of His people. And, if He is aware of their needs, do the disciples think that He would heal their diseases, cast out their demons, and proclaim their coming joy with Him in heaven, only so that they can that they can starve on this hillside?

One of the most comforting thoughts in all the Gospels come from John's recalling of this 'Feeding of the 5000'. You may have missed it; it goes by so quickly. Look again at verses 5-6 of John 6.

⁵Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

John is the only disciple to record this little nugget, this glimpse into the love and compassion of God made flesh for us.

The crowds come. They followed Jesus and the disciples who had crossed over the lake from the previous day of all the healing He had accomplished. Having sought Him again, they were a long way from home. But Jesus does what Jesus came to do; He has compassion on their many and great needs. He heals the sick, He cares for their present illnesses, and sorrows. Jesus pours Himself out as He takes their brokenness into Himself – all day long! The day is well spent when the disciples come to Him and urge Him to send the people away. They are tired. There isn't enough food for everyone to be satisfied, not even in the surrounding villages! At least that is the disciples' little faith! **But we can REJOICE!** Jesus already knew what He would do before the day of healing and comfort began!

Should we think less of our good Lord today in regards to the tremendous needs, sorrows, and afflictions we presently face? Is it possible that our gracious and loving Lord – who died that we might live – no longer has any idea how He is going to work to preserve us and care for our every need? Did this time of pestilence sneak up on the Holy Trinity? Is God surprised by the situation facing our global pandemic? Is Covid-19 forcing Him to scramble to provide the aid and support so many of His followers are desperately crying out to receive? And does He not care for the unbelievers affected by this plague either?

Faith and trust are certainly tested in unprecedented times like this. But He is no 'Bread King' only! He is not satisfied to simply supply just the necessary food to sustain the body in this life! His love compels Him to give you the true food – manna from heaven – His very body and blood that forgives your sins, even the sin of little faith. He continually restores eternal life as He daily and richly pours out His gifts of grace, mercy, and peace through Word and Sacrament. In this we rejoice, knowing that no trial or temptation or affliction will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

***"And take they our life,
Good, fame, child, and wife.
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.
(LSB656, vs. 4b, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God)***