

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Isaiah 49:8-13  
March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015

We have reached the half-way point for the season of Lent. This is “hump day” as far as the Lenten season goes. It’s interesting that we call this day, “Laetare” or “rejoicing” Sunday. Why are we rejoicing? We are in the middle of the most penitential season of the church-year. We are smack dab in the middle of keeping the “Alleluias” out of the liturgy, omitting the Te Deum in the Matins Service and sing hymns like, “**Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted**” and “**Chief of Sinners Though I Be...**” With the tone of the season reminding us of our sins and our Savior’s Suffering, why rejoice?

Just like that funny Geico commercial where the camel walks around the office trying to get his coworkers to get excited about his favorite day to the week – asking them to “guess what day it is”, Lent has its Wednesday “hump day” and that is today. And maybe that camel was on to something. It’s hump day as far as Lent is concerned and there is a reason why this is called “rejoicing” Sunday. We are half way through, we are on the downward track, we are on our way to Calvary and we have the work of salvation in our sights. We can gaze at the cross and we can see the tomb where He would lay. We are almost there and there is a joyful anticipation. That’s the idea with “Laetare.”

In the Old Testament text for today Isaiah speaks of the restoration of Israel. He says, “*This is what the Lord says: In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you...*” He goes on to say, “*Shout for joy, O heavens; Rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.*” Isaiah is telling the people that they can rejoice now because of what the Lord promises to them in the future. They can be confident that the Lord will deliver them. They can be assured that the Lord will not forsake them and at the end of the race, they will finish victorious.

And so it is with hump day and with Laetare. All we have to do is get through the middle – that is, get to the top of this long arduous climb during Lent. If we can do that – it’s all downhill from here. We can start our sprint downhill – toward the hill – called Calvary where it all happens for us.

That’s what gets us to the end – looking ahead and knowing what “will” happen – what is yet to come. Isaiah in the text for today uses the future tense twelve different times. “*I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people...They will neither hunger nor thirst...He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.*” The Lord has future promises for His people and He has future promises for us.

The Lord knows our suffering and disillusion today – present tense. He knows the troubles that we have and because of that – He makes sure to use the future tense for us as well. The same words that were given to the children of Israel promising restoration can be applied to our “future” lives. There will be a time when there will be no more hunger and thirst. There will be a time when pain is taken away. There will be a time when the veil of tears of this world will be lifted and the Lord will come again and take us from this dreaded place. And it is dreaded, even if your life and circumstances right now are all that you could ever hope for.

Now I don’t mean to be the bearer of bad news – but its news that we must expect. This news comes our way because of the sin that stains the world we live in. And it’s bad news for us – because of us – and because of others who hurt us. Just like there will be a future deliverance for those in Christ, there will also be before us a future filled with heartache and sadness on this side of eternity. We are not going to escape this life without the hard to deal with times that are “not fair.” That’s the way it is. And if we have any experience in life at all, we know that if that time isn’t right now, then that time will come. That’s life in this sin-filled world.

Now remember, portions of the book of Isaiah are being used for our Midweek Lenten theme, “Singing with the Exiles.” We have observed so far that God’s people Israel are not all that receptive to God’s directions – even when they are told they will live in a place that is not their own – in captivity in the land of Babylon. Babylon was a rich place. They had their own gods. The Israelites had their names changed from the names that would identify them as God’s people, to the names that would identify themselves with Marduk, the god of Babylon. This city was a place of excess and extravagance. It was perhaps a comfortable place to be – and if the children of God had to identify themselves with another god in order to enjoy such earthly treasures, then so be it. They were not lining up – not too eager – to identify with their own God of a far-away land.

In today’s world the same happens with Christians. Babylon with all of its false gods is all around us. And we like that. We reflect that in our sins – that we are more “of” the world rather than Christians who have to be “in” the world. We love to be “of” the world because that is where we gain the praise of others, where we “fit-in,” where we get ahead and have our secret desires met. But you belong to Christ – not Babylon. You belong here and the world is where we live reflecting to others who we belong to in the way we live and act. We may go before the Lord’s throne during Lent singing, “*Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted*,” but we go forth in the world with the Laetare joy as one marked with Christ, reflecting in our lives the love of Christ and the assurance of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. Stricken and smitten? Yes. But restored in Christ? Absolutely! Such are the words for the people of Israel in the Old Testament text for today. Those words are for them and you!!

The late great English writer G.K. Chesterton wrote about Jesus and why he became a Christian in a book called “Orthodoxy.” Chesterton was once an avowed atheist– a man who lived for Babylon and not Christ – who fought Christianity with all his might. Later, the renowned C.S. Lewis would call Chesterton one of his great influences.

Chesterton said that there was a mystique about Jesus that no one understood and that was hidden from all people. It was something that was too great for God to show us when He walked the earth. “Then,” he said, “as I have studied and restudied the life of Jesus, I have discovered that the great secret He kept hidden from everyone was His great joy.”

Christianity without joy is nothing. We are a restored people – both now and in the future. We are a forgiven and redeemed people who belong to the faithful flock on the way to heaven. We are a people with great joy.

It takes a Christian to understand joy in the midst of hardships. It takes a Christian to realize there is gladness smack dab in the middle of Lent. It takes a Christian to know that Jesus loves you very much. While this is true, I want you to know, that Christians know this joy, but it doesn’t always mean we feel this joy – no matter what season it is. Here is where I would like to make a distinction for you.

There are times of joy – feeling joy. And, there are times of joy – receiving and having joy. One comes and goes all the time. When bad times are upon us, the feeling of joy is difficult to find. When days are good and happiness abounds, the feeling of joy comes easy. The feeling comes and goes. But that’s not the kind of joy that Chesterton pointed out seems hidden or kept a secret. It’s not a secret at all. It’s real and it’s a gift and it comes to every person who has faith in the one true God – Jesus the Lord. Joy is more than a feeling – it’s substance that penetrates into the lives of sinners and makes you into a new creation – a saint in the eyes of the Lord.

Laetare – rejoice! Lent has joy right in the middle. We are on our way to Holy Week and then Easter. Rejoice! Hump day is here and Jesus will soon be here as well. Amen

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