

Jesse Perkins  
Friday, March 9, 2018  
Year B Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
John 3:14-21

“Rejoice, O Jerusalem, and come together all you that love her; rejoice with joy you that have been in sorrow.”<sup>1</sup>

- If you were to stumble into a Medieval Church on this Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent
  - The traditional Latin Mass would have begun with these words sung in Latin as the Introit, or opening music while the priest approaches the altar
  - Today we have an opening hymn, but before congregations sung together, these Gregorian chanted introits were sung by the choir
  - It is from this old tradition that this Sunday gets its name: Laetare<sup>2</sup>, meaning “be joyful”, or “to rejoice”
    - It is also known as “mothering Sunday”, a day when servants were released to visit their mothers
  - Traditions for today include the Pope blessing golden roses, eating Simnel cake <sup>3</sup>(which we will do in coffee hour, thanks Dolores)
  - Weddings were traditionally done on this day, even though they are not done during the other days of Lent
  - And it is one of two occasions where priests may wear rose, or pink, vestments instead of the purple.
  - So why all the fuss?
  - Well, we are officially half way through Lent!
  - This Sunday is an oasis, or respite, for us who have been doing the hard work of introspection and repentance
  - I think there’s a lot of wisdom in our liturgical pattern of life, and the ancient church knew that if you were doing Lent seriously

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sspx.org/en/news-events/news/rejoice-o-jerusalem-laetare-sunday-7330>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laetare\\_Sunday](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laetare_Sunday)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simnel\\_cake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simnel_cake)

- Then by now you could use a little break, some good cake, and especially some good news from the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- Over a thousand years later, human beings have not changed much
- And I don't know about you, but for a number of reasons I could stand a little bit of good news today
- I could also stand to be reminded about why we are doing this in the first place-
- Why does the church call us to a holy Lent of introspection and repentance, why do we have to look at our own sins?
- Even though our lectionary came much later in history than did the start of Laetare Sunday
  - It has continued tradition of bringing good news to faithful people who are in the midst of Lent
  - And right away, as the gospel begins for today, Jesus says that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness
    - So must the son of man be lifted up.
  - And helpfully, we are provided that very story out of Numbers so we can better understand what Jesus is saying
  - In our search for good news worthy of rejoicing, let's start there
- The Israelites are wandering in the wilderness
  - Wandering between slavery in Egypt, and the promised land
  - Between spiritual adolescence and adulthood
    - The New Oxford Annotated Bible talks about the book of Numbers as God's attempt to bring Israel into spiritual adulthood<sup>4</sup>-
    - To a mature people who worship God and follow God's laws instinctively
  - But this is not a quick process, and it soon becomes clear that it takes longer than one generation
  - This pericope, or excerpt, is another illustration of that process of maturity
  - The people are complaining, again, about the food- there's no food, no water... well, there is food but it is terrible
  - As the story goes, the Lord sent poisonous serpents to bite the people and many died
    - The assumption is that God was punishing them for their complaining
  - The people, realizing their mistake, asked Moses for help

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<sup>4</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV, fourth edition, 2010, p. 186

- And God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze, put it upon a pole, and if a serpent bites a person, they can look at the statue and live.
- Now, at this point in the lesson, if you are like me, things have become a little weird
- There is so much about this passage that is foreign and confusing to 21st century ears<sup>5</sup>
  - Don't you agree?
- Can we start out by asking, would God really send poisonous snakes to bite and kill people for complaining?
- And would God really command Moses to make a graven image of a snake in violation of the second commandment?
  - And then punished them for making a golden calf
  - And a snake of all things? An image of the very thing that was biting them.
- And strangely the serpent on the pole did not make the snakes go away- they kept biting people
- The pole simply kept you alive after you had been bitten.
- In the next verses, the people of Israel picked up camp and continued their journey through the desert, and their quest for a land of their own
- Fun fact- many years later, that serpent pole, eventually called "Nohestan", meaning "a mere brass thing."
  - Would be destroyed by King Hezekiah because the people had begun to worship it. <sup>6</sup>
- Now I will confess to you- I love passages of scripture like this one
  - Man, it is rich.
  - Now when I encounter a passage like this where a lot is going on, and it doesn't make sense, it becomes harder to see it as simply history
    - Or literal, historical events that happened exactly as they are recorded here some thousands of years later.
  - But if you look at it as oral tradition, rich in symbolism, maybe based in history, you get a lot of good stuff out of it
  - And a few things stick out for me in this passage: first, the snake
  - The symbol of the original sin, the original tempter in the Garden of Eden

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2393](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2393)

<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nehushtan>

- There were also snake cults in Caanan, so in some ways the snake represented an idol from a nearby religious tradition <sup>7</sup>
- It is no mistake that when the people gave into complaining and became discontent with God's provision and were tempted to turn away from God
- Sin, in the form of a snake, came into the camp and hurt them.
  - That almost serves as a reminder of the story of Adam and Eve in the garden with the snake, when sin came into the world
- While that part of scripture ended with them being expelled from the Garden, this time God works out another way to overcome this
- The Israelites, in order to overcome their sin, had to look at it
- A snake on a pole symbolizing everything that had gone wrong in their relationship with God
- They had to see it for what it was, name it, take away its power
- And turn back to God who was faithful to forgive them time and time again.
- See, it wasn't the snake on the pole that healed them-
- The snake was there to remind them of their sin, and to remind them that they desperately needed God to heal them
- And God did. And will again.
- Now that is a lesson worth telling, that is something you would want to pass along to your children, a reason to include it in Holy Scripture
- That, my friends, is not too unlike what we are doing during Lent.
- Looking at our sins, seeing them for what they are, and returning to the Lord
- Jesus says, just like that, the son of man must be lifted up
  - Because when we look at Jesus on that cross, we are looking at our sin too
  - The sin of our own wandering away from God, our own discontentment and envy
  - Our collective sin that resulted in the crucifixion of an innocent person on a cross- capital punishment gone wrong.
  - Our never-ending ability to believe that we are find on our own and do not need God
  - Our ability and history of hurting one another

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<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nehushtan>

- And yet, in spite of all of that, our many sins that we are distinctively aware of during Lent
- Jesus goes on to say, in one of the most famous, most memorized verses of scripture in our Bible...
- The good news we so desperately need to hear today...
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.”
- “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. “
- Sometimes we have to look up at our sins to see just how much God loves us
- To see just how high a price God paid to reach us, to love us, to save us from ourselves.
- And it is great. Unbelievable. Extravagant.
- That we can have life eternal after we die, and can have fullness of life before it
- That our sins, our failures, even though they are always before us, cannot separate us from the love of God.
- Laetare!
  - “Rejoice with joy you that have been in sorrow.”<sup>8</sup>
  - I hope you go home today with a song in your heart
  - I hope you go home today and eat chocolate, or meat, or wine, or whatever it is that you gave up this Lent
  - And I hope you go home today seeing sin, but not just sin
  - Seeing sin as a measuring stick that shows us just how much love God has for us.
  - Paul says our salvation is not of our own doing- it is a pure gift from God
  - And now we are created in Christ Jesus for good works.
  - Rejoice! Give Thanks. And sing.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://sspx.org/en/news-events/news/rejoice-o-jerusalem-laetare-sunday-7330>