

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

- Rejoice.
 - Here we are, officially half way through Lent... well, halfway to Easter at least
 - We have talked about how we might view Lent differently this year, given our continuing and extenuating circumstances
 - Focusing not on the deprivation and self-sacrifice aspect so much
 - But on the positive ways in which you can grow closer to God and to the people you love- or the people you have not yet even met
 - I hope your efforts have been fruitful
 - You see, walking through Lent in this way still brings us to a point of looking inward in self-examination
 - While looking up to God and side to side at our neighbors
 - The self-analysis, the self observation work, is still work.
 - At times it is hard work, we see things in the mirror that we do not exactly like
 - We see our sin, in the traditional church language
 - And in a more modern way of speaking about the same thing, we see our weaknesses and growing edges, times when we have hurt others
 - Times where we are not the person we want to be, and who God wants us to be.
 - We become aware, and from that point we can begin the very hard work of changing ourselves.
 - If you have ever been in therapy, AA, ALANON, had a good spiritual director
 - Or even tried to lose weight or get more fit... and have it stick for the long term

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

- You know what I am talking about here. Improving ourselves- physically, emotionally AND spiritually, is hard work
- And every now and then we need some cheering up, some reminders that we are not defined by just our failures
 - Or just our shortcomings... the things we see wrong
- But we are loved as we are.
- And today is that day- Laetare Sunday, or mothering Sunday, when we are comforted and encouraged to keep it up for a few weeks more at least
- The name comes from that opening line in the sermon,
 - Which traditionally was the opening introit sung by the choir in high church, Medieval settings²
- Traditions for today normally include the Pope blessing golden roses, wearing rose vestments to match those roses, and eating Simnel cake³
- Like the many centuries of Christians who walked this way before us, we too need a break
- And so this tradition 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 adulthood⁴-
 - To a mature people who worship God and follow God's laws instinctively
 - I love that analogy, by the way- I think it can apply to the whole Biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation!

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laetare_Sunday

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simnel_cake

⁴ The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV, fourth edition, 2010, p. 186

- 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
- 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 weird⁵
- 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 on biting people
- The pole simply kept you alive after you had been bitten.
- In the next verses, the people of Israel just picked up camp and continued their journey through the desert
- 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. ⁶
- Now I will confess to you- I love passages of scripture like this one
 - Man, it is rich. It is like Kay Lewis mentioned last week- a preacher loves some good drama
 - A few things stick out for me in this passage: first, the snake

⁵ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2393

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

- The symbol of the original sin, the original tempter in the Garden of Eden
- There were also snake cults in Caanan, so in some ways the snake represented an idol from a nearby religious tradition ⁷
- 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
- And God working out new ways to bring us back.
- Jesus says, just like that, the son of man must be lifted up
 - See, we went through all of that in order to better understand what Jesus was telling them in today's Gospel
 - Because when we look at Jesus lifted up on that cross, we are looking at our sin too-
 - Just like looking at the snake on the pole would remind the ancient Israelites of their sin and need for God

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

- Our sin of own wandering away from God, our own discontentment and envy and complaining
- 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 fine on our own and do not need God
- Our ability and history of hurting one another, of our biases
- 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...
- That even with all of that sin, “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 while we live on this earth! ⁸
- 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.” ⁹
 - 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
 - Or smile knowing that whatever parts of yourselves you are trying to improve, God already knows all the dark secrets and struggles- and still loves you.
 - And I hope you go home today seeing sin, but not just sin

⁸ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent4b>

⁹ <http://ssp.org/en/news-events/news/rejoice-o-jerusalem-laetare-sunday-7330>

- Seeing sin as a measuring stick that shows us just how much love God has for us.
 - God has more love and grace than we have sin and shortcomings.
- 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.
- So rejoice today, and maybe take some of that joy and share it
- Find a way to bring that joy to someone else this week
- Be kind. Buy someone's dinner. Donate to a good cause.
- Wave and say hello
- We all need a little more of that joy this Lent.
- And guess what, people of God- we have that good news.
- We have that joy.
- Let's pass it on.

Amen.