



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 27, 2022
The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*
on
Joshua 5:9-16-21; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
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Laetare Sunday 2022

And the Father said to the Son, "It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Today is the day, indeed, when it is meet that we should make merry and be glad. This is the day that the Lord has made, which we hail as our mid-point through Lent. Strictly speaking, that day was Thursday, but for centuries we have celebrated this Sunday as Laetare Sunday, an oasis of rejoicing in a desolate season of prayer, fasting, and penance. The word "Laetare" is the singular imperative of "rejoice," so it is something between a command or a request to each of us.

The Introit historically appointed for this day, from the Prophet Isaiah, is a call to rejoice, not alone, but with the Holy City, Jerusalem. Isaiah portrays that city as a mother, with us being cradled in her lap. "Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her: That ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations; that ye may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory." There is gratitude and joy, here, yes, but did you notice Isaiah's mention of "mourning"? This is because he has already prophesied Jerusalem's coming ruin at the hands of her enemy, Babylon. A dark time to come, when even the Temple, the home of God's presence with them, will be desecrated and destroyed. Despite the burning wreck ahead, Isaiah wants his people to know of God's life and sustenance that is far deeper than the appearance of God's home, Jerusalem, drawing them to that deeper well of consolation. For him, even if we have reason to sorrow in her ruins, we still need to find a place in our hearts to rejoice in what she has to still give us as God's children. What is the basis of this call to rejoice even in the ruins of what we cherish? Perhaps this question is ever more urgent as we witness the images of senseless ruin and displacement in Ukraine on our screens. How can anyone find the heart to rejoice when such things happen before our helpless eyes?

Well, one way to answer that question is the very building we are worshiping in this morning. This church was built upon the ruin of the former church, which burned one dreadful night on this site in 1905. Their resolve was immediate, you know. In little more than 10 years, 1916, they consecrated this church for its sacred purpose, finding renewal in ruin. That celebration, too, took place in a cataclysmically dark period, to say the least, during the Great War, a time of overwhelming loss and ruin we found a way to rejoice at what we didn't know was the mid-point of that red fog. And so much of the iconography of the carvings that would subsequently be installed in the stone of the reredos and the wood of the choir are informed by that

war, seeking to make something beautiful in the shadow of such organized horror. Somehow this community knew how to marshal their spirits and even rejoice in times of local and global desolation.

The death of a person, an entire city, even the death of an era of civilization, this is never really the end to the true life that God begins and sustains in us. And because of this, there is a rejoicing that can find its way by God's grace into ruined lives, a light that can shine in deepest darkness. As Pope Innocent III preached one Laetare Sunday 800 years ago, today is the day in Lent to seek out and celebrate "love after hate, joy after sorrow, and fullness after hunger."

In our reading from Judges, we see some of that joyful "fullness after hunger." The Israelites have, with Joshua's guidance after Moses' death, finally made it to the promised land. And, now, having crossed the River Jordan into its sacred borders, they rejoice, for now, they no longer have need of the manna, the food of the wilderness and the desert, holy, yes, but spare and bland. And so, on a most triumphant Passover, they eat from the crops of the land of Canaan, a night of abundance and blessing.

In the Gospel's parable of Jesus about the two brothers and the father we see the demonstration of "joy after sorrow." No matter how far his son had wandered, no matter how far he had fallen or ruined his life, the father was poised to rejoice at his repentance and return. His son was thought lost and dead, but look, he's back! And so this day is one of celebration for an overwhelmed father. "Bring forth the best robe, fine ring, new sandals, and fatted calf. My son was dead, but now he lives! Let us sing and rejoice!"

We are left in suspense as to whether the long-faithful elder son can find "love after hate." Can he overcome his resentment of a celebration that will never be for him? Can his anger at his father's generous love ever be cooled? What will it take for this dedicated son to accept a world where joy can be found in a ruin, such as his brother's wasted life?

The same suspense is there for the long-faithful disciples and other hearers of the parable, back in the real world, who are so upset that tax collectors and notorious sinners are coming to Jesus. Their frustration is the seed of this parable. Because these scorned persons are now, in Christ, receiving the same healing and blessing that they are, likely in even more dramatic fashion, turning their ruined lives around to general acclaim. Can the long-faithful ones get beyond their resentment, anger, and hatred to find peace, even fellowship, with such scandalous people?

For Paul in one Letter to the Corinthians, he insists that it is possible, indeed it is the only path worth taking, for in the death, then resurrection of Christ, we now see no one from the outside, "after the flesh" so to speak, but we now see them from the inside, as God sees them and loves them, "after the Spirit." And because Christ now leads us, even through the valley of the shadow of death, all things, even ruined people, have been made new, and we share in his life of reconciliation and restoration, becoming diplomats, of a sort, emissaries of merciful heaven on Christ's behalf, living a life of "love after hate, joy after sorrow, and fullness after hunger." It seems a counter-intuitive path, but, after reflection, it really is the only viable way out of the darkness and ash of this world.

The word "Laetare" in Latin, I am surprised to discover, does not just mean "Rejoice!" The same verb "laeto" also means "to fertilize," or to apply manure to the soil. So the command is not just about spontaneously being happy. There is work to be done, not just "Rejoice!" but "Fertilize, my people!" for there is soil within to work, and the stuff that you are working with is pretty stinky and what smells like the worst, but from that deathly stench (carefully managed and spread about) comes renewal for the earth, from that death comes even more fertility and beauty.

And it is no surprise that the Latin church would have found horticultural connections on such a day, deep in a relatively dreary season, as they looked beyond Christ's death to his joyous Resurrection. For just as from soil stirred with pungent manure even bright roses could grow, so does Christ emerge from the pungent

tomb to make all things new and bright, and bitter no more. What better image is there of God's ways in Christ, as Isaiah would put it, the flower that springs from the root of Jesse, what better image than that flower which opens to the sun out of all of those piercing thorns, opening with delicate petals that bear the red tint of his passion, now filling our air with sweetness and our vision with beauty? With these vestments, and these flowers found in the heart of Lent, we summon the will to strain our inner vision for the deliverance and beauty that comes among so many thorns, whether in Jerusalem of old, or any ruined place over there or deep in here (point to heart). For in Christ, the Rose of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the "old things are passed away. Behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God."

And so, my brothers and sisters: "It is meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy world was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

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