

March 14, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

**Fourth Sunday of Lent/Laetare Sunday**

In less than one week, Spring will arrive, and the long, cold, dark Winter will officially end. But, as I mentioned last Sunday, the signs of Spring are already all around us. In fact, we all experienced a true reality of “springtime” during the wee hours of this morning when we all had to “Spring Forward”, taking us from Standard to Daylight Savings Time. And of course that means there will be more “light” than “darkness” in days, weeks and months ahead.

I think it’s safe to say that most of us prefer the light to darkness, unless of course we’re trying to get a good night’s sleep. And that’s true, not only because we need Light to see, but also we need Light to feel safe, secure, not alone. The images of “Light” are usually of things that are positive; whereas “Darkness” is unsavory---connotes danger---a sense of foreboding, gloom or sadness.

Today we’re celebrating the Fourth Sunday of Lent---it’s a little more than the half-way point through these 40 days of prayer and penitence, and so the Church helps us to pause—take a breath---and Rejoice! Rejoice, because we’re drawing closer and closer to the great Feast of Easter. Rejoice, because our reason for fasting is ending and the cause of our Feasting and celebrating will soon be here. Rejoice, because Jesus, the Light of the World, has triumphed over Sin, Darkness and Death---and we share in his Victory! So---let us be filled with Joy!

All the Readings from God’s Holy Word which we’ve just heard proclaimed also give us many reasons to be joyful!

In the First Reading from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Chronicles, we heard how the Israelites had pretty much completely turned away from God’s ways, and consistently violated the Covenant they had made with God. We heard in that Reading what they had done: expressing “*infidelity after infidelity*”, performing “*abominations of the nations*”, “*polluting the Lord’s temple*”, “*mocking God’s messengers*”, and “*despising God’s warnings*”. And yet, what did God do? God remained faithful. As we heard, “*early and often did the Lord send His messengers to them for He had compassion on His people.*” God never stopped hoping that His people would turn back to Him. Finally, their infidelity brought about their own destruction as the Babylonians defeated them, and sent the entire nation into captivity and slavery in Babylon for the next 3 generations---70 years. Talk about a time of darkness.

But that Reading doesn't end there. We also heard about a non-believing/Pagan King named Cyrus of Persia. The Persians conquered the Babylonians, and Cyrus, as we heard, was "*inspired by the Lord God*", to release the Israelites from bondage, and not only allowed them to return to their own country, but rebuilt the Temple back in Jerusalem which the Babylonians had destroyed, so that they would have a place to worship God. Now, that's truly returning to a time of Light, and a cause for Joy!

In today's Second Reading, St. Paul reminded us that we have received God's great Love and His Gift of Salvation. We don't earn or merit Salvation; it's not a reward for all the good things we do in our lifetime, or in exchange for lots of sacrifices and penances we take on during Lent. No, it's a Gift! And, as with all gifts, it's up to us: do we choose to accept it with gratitude and live in the Light of God's Love; or do we reject it---ignore it--and choose to keep living in darkness?

And in today's Gospel, we heard Jesus tell Nicodemus that God did not send Him---"*the Son*"---into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

As Jesus said: "*Whoever believes in the Son will not be condemned; but whoever does not believe has already been condemned.*"

Now, we might say: Well, of course that makes sense; who wouldn't want to be saved? But, as we heard Jesus say just a few sentences later: "*The Light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light.*" What? Who in their right mind would prefer darkness to light? That would be like today, if when we "sprung forward", that meant not an hour more of light each 24 hours, but that there would be no daylight---ever; only 24-hour/day darkness. Who would want that?!

As we know, many of our Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ frequently talk about "being saved". Jesus has accomplished that great Act of Salvation, and (as we heard St. Paul tell us) all of us baptized into Christ share in that great Grace of being saved. In some Protestant theology, there is the belief that anyone who accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior not only is saved, no matter what else they might do in their lifetime, including grave sins they might commit. Our Catholic theology reminds us that while Jesus has indeed accomplished that great Act of Salvation, and we do---thru our Baptism into Christ---share in that Victory, and are "saved"----we can lose that great Gift by turning away from God through sin. And that's precisely why Jesus provided for us the Sacrament of Penance, so that we

can confess and be delivered from the Darkness of our sins, receive God's forgiveness because of what Jesus has won for us, and return to live in the Light of Christ in our lives.

There's no greater reason to Rejoice than in that basic Truth of our Salvation. That's why the Scripture verse "John 3:16", that you might often see people holding up on placards in public gatherings (when we used to have those---remember?) is this very verse that we heard Jesus tell Nicodemus in today's Gospel: "*God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him might have Eternal Life.*" And for us People of Faith baptized into Christ, "Eternal Life" isn't something that starts after we die; no, Eternal Life means living life in the Light of Christ, united with Him and with His Church, starting right now. And if/when we sin, including if God forbid we temporarily break our relationship with God thru serious sin, that "Eternal Life" is restored as soon as we are reconciled again with God thru Confession and the Eucharist.

Jesus not only saves us from the ultimate darkness of sin and death, but He also saves us from the darkness of selfishness, of undue fear and anxiety, from the evil effects of racism, violence and hatred. When God sent His Son into the world, it wasn't for Him to just live here for 33 years, accomplish His great Act of Salvation, and return to Heaven after the Ascension, only to return at the End of the World. No, Jesus remains One with us thru His Church, in God's Word, by the power of the Sacraments, and in the loving support of one another, members of His Body of Christ on earth.

Now, while it is very important for us to "rejoice" in this amazing Good News of God's Love for us, we also need to remember that this Love came at an enormous "Price". God did not condemn the world, but He did allow His Son to take upon Himself the guilt of the world's sin---the guilt of all humanity from the days of the Old Testament and the guilt of all humanity that would come after. That includes the guilt of my sins, and the guilt of your sins. And we know what that "price" was---- Jesus' death on the Cross. Every time we look at the Crucifix, we remember that costly price. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son---He sacrificed His only Son for our redemption!

So, if you're feeling unloved, discouraged, or worthless----look at Jesus on the Cross and know that you are loved! If you ever feel like no one cares, look here and see---you have been cared for from all Eternity. If you think your problems are bigger, or that your sins are too numerous or too bad ---look here and see

that Jesus has conquered all our problems and forgiven all our sins. If you think that you have good reason to be angry, that the grudges you're holding against certain individuals are justified, that you simply cannot forgive a relative/friend/colleague for a deep hurt or injury that they've committed against you---listen to Jesus say with His dying breath: "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!*" If you feel overwhelmed by fears of this ongoing pandemic, or the distress over the huge divisions among people in our country due to political differences or other issues, or worry about how life will be in the future---just look at the Crucifix, and remember that Jesus' Love conquers all divisions, and God is with us no matter what.

We're entering into the second half----and most exciting part---of Lent. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we should decide to renew our Lenten resolutions, in case we've gotten off track; or if you haven't actually started any resolutions yet---it's not too late to do so. Today is also a good day to make up your mind to take these next 3 weeks of Lent very seriously; to make room for additional times of prayer; to make a good Confession; to practice acts of self-denial, sacrifice and works of charity. And I hope we'll all make time to just look at Jesus Crucified, and be moved by the incredible Act of God's Love for us, and thank God for "saving us" in His Grace, as St. Paul reminded us.

With that amazing grace of God's Love, which He continues to offer us "*early and often*", may we turn away from the "darkness" of our lives----those acts of selfishness, fear, loneliness or anger---so that we can choose to live in the "Light" of Eternal Life starting now. That's the most important reason why today is called "Rejoice" Sunday---because our God loves us so much that He has given us *His Son so that we might not perish, but might have Eternal Life.*

We rejoice today because God loves us, and through Jesus' Suffering, Death, and Resurrection---because of what Jesus has done for us and with God's Grace---we will live forever. Let us resolve today, and keep resolving, to live our lives united with Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life----to live in Jesus, the Light of the World and the Cause of our Joy.

God bless you, now and always!